

MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS

Ten years ago we did a series titled Hero
based on heroes that we find in the movies.
One of the films we used was Mr. Holland's Opus.
The lecture was titled: A Hero Unawares.

Mr. Holland's Opus is about a teacher.
And movies about teachers usually fall into one of two categories.

The most common is the teacher who shows up,
often against his or her will,
to teach students who are either rebellious or unmotivated.
And in one short year,
usually employing rather unorthodox methods of instruction,
he or she educates the students that there is a world of
ideas and culture "out there."

And the charisma of the teacher's personality is so compelling
that the students are gloriously transformed and
their lives are forever changed.

The other type of "teacher movie" is where the teacher stays put,
works hard,
sees small victories along the way, and
after a lifetime of teaching
if he is lucky,
realizes, the difference he has made.

Mr. Holland's Opus is a bit of a hybrid.
To teach music appreciation – he uses rock n roll.
The nerve of him!

He does clash with the school administration.
And he does have breakthroughs with individual students.

But for him it's not one and done –
one semester or one year and then he's gone forever.

Mr. Holland stays
at the same school,
in the same community,
doing the same thing,
for thirty years,
unaware of the impact he has made
or how much he has meant in the lives of others.

But there is one difference in Mr. Holland's Opus from the typical teacher
movie.

In both types of "teacher movies,"
the emphasis is on the change that occurs within the students:
how the teacher, as hero, transforms their lives.

But that's not the point in Mr. Holland's Opus.
Not really.
It's there,
but what drives the movie is not so much the question:
Will Mr. Holland work his magic and change the kids?
But: Will the kids change him?

As the movie begins it's clear
that it's Glenn Holland's heart that must be transformed
if he is going to be anyone's hero
and live a life that's worth celebrating.

And the changes that Mr. Holland must make
are similar to the changes that most men must make
if we are to live anything approaching a heroic life.

The movie opens with Glenn Holland,
still a young man,
finding himself where he never thought he'd be,
doing what he never thought he'd have to do.

He's teaching music to high school students,
most of whom would rather be anywhere but his class.

Getting his teaching certificate was something he did
only so he would have something to fall back on.
And now he's there.

Teaching school is the gig,
and that's how he sees it,
that will get him off the road.

He's tired of playing weddings and bar mitzvahs
and weekends at The Holiday Inn.

His true calling, he believes, is to be a composer.
And so he falls back on teaching school,
because that will allow him the time to do what he really wants to do.

Clip Ch 3. 10:51 – 11:58.

If you have been a teacher,
or if you have been married to a teacher,
or if one of your parents was a teacher,
and both of mine were,
you get the joke.

The hours are long,
the pay is small,
the car you drive is a few years older,
and the vacations you take
aren't nearly as exotic,
as others seem to enjoy.

At least that's the way I remember it.

And the idea that you would take a teaching job
so you could have plenty of time,
and lots of energy in the evenings to do something that you
really care about,
well, that just not how it works.

My dad was a high school band director,
and he got up at 5,
got home at 7 or 8,
after teaching private lessons for \$3.00 an hour
to help his students and
to make some extra income for his family.
And then he was asleep by 9:30.

If you're a teacher,
you better love teaching.
Because if you're a teacher,
and you don't love it,
you'll be miserable,
as Mr. Holland soon learns.

But Glenn Holland
thinks teaching will give him the free time he needs
to complete his masterwork,
his symphony,
the legacy he will leave behind for the world.

He'll teach four years, tops,
and then he'll have enough saved
that he can do what he loves
and compose music full-time.

Of course, things don't often end up how we figure.
 Sometimes they end up much better.
 And sometimes the legacy we leave
 is greater than we ever would have ever imagined.

You know how the movie ends.

Clip Ch 2.06.18 – 2.11.18 – with edits

Sometimes the legacy we leave and the impact we make
 is more than we would have ever dreamed.
 But that happens only if we learn some lessons along the way,
 and we are changed.

I want to look at some lessons that Mr. Holland learned
 and that maybe we need to learn, too.

One, he learned that

1. BEING RESPONSIBLE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING FREE.

Here, I'm not talking about freedom from slavery or tyranny.

I'm referring to how men,
 especially young men,
 think about what it means to be a man.

And usually it has a lot to do with freedom.

A man is someone who can do what he wants to do.
 Whether it's the 16 year old getting his license,
 or the 21 year old being able to walk into a bar,
 or the prodigal son that Jesus talked about
 taking off to a far country
 where he didn't have to do what his father wanted him to do –
 Young men,
 and lots of us older guys,
 we think that being a man and being free are synonymous.

I'm the man,
so I can do what I want to do when I want to do it.

I'm in in charge of my own life.
I call my own his shots.

And even if I have to toe the line at work,
my time is my time,
and as soon as the bell rings,
I am free.

And that's what you see in the young Mr. Holland.

Clip: Ch 6 21.28 – 22.23

Life has a way of putting responsibilities upon us.

We get married.
Children come along.
Then there's a mortgage.

And we're not free just to up and quit
because we don't like our jobs or
our boss is a jerk.

And if you're Mr. Holland,
you have all those things,
and then you have a child who is deaf,
and needs extra care
and expensive schools.

And so you stay at your job
and you teach Driver's Ed when you thought you'd have time
for your opus and for what you wanted to do.

And I'll tell you what happens.
Either guys grow up and they become responsible.
Or they become fixated on their freedom,
and they remain boys.

I'm convinced that's how many guys get into trouble.
They value "being free" more than they value being responsible.
And so when they have to be responsible,
they rebel.

And instead of coming home,
they stay out late with – the boys.

Interesting, isn't it?
We don't say they stay out late with the men,
we say they stay out late with the boys.

They stay out late and/or
they drink too much.
Or they have an affair.
Or they spend money they don't have
and buy things they don't need.

Often it happens seven years into a marriage,
or thereabouts.

It happens in mid-life for a lot of guys.
That's what the sports car
or the younger woman is about,
or at least they can be.

And every guy at some point has to answer the question,
What's more important to me?
Keeping my freedom or keeping my commitments?

Here's a quote from the book "The Unbearable Lightness of Being."
 It's about a man who devotes himself to work and to womanizing,
 all the while he is married.

Finally, he comes to believe that true happiness
 will be found only in faithfulness
 and he recommitments himself to his wife.

This quote is a bit heavy for six in the morning,
 but some of you will get it and like it,
 I think.

Milan Kundera: The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. Conversely, the absolute absence of burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant. What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

If I understand this quote,
 I like it,
 and I like it a lot.

The things in life that are burdens and responsibilities and commitments,
 they seem to weigh us down
 and restrict our freedom,
 but the alternative is to have no responsibilities and keep no commitments,
 and though we are free to do whatever we choose,
 our lives have no substance,
 no weight,
 and we float along,
 unattached to what's most real,
 and our lives, though free,
 are insignificant and inconsequential.

Hit the door as soon as the last class is over,
 put in your time
 but don't put in your heart,
 take off as soon as your marriage gets hard
 and the kids are a problem,
 come to church
 but never commit your life to Christ,
 learn all kinds of spiritual truths
 but never become a servant,
 and you'll be free.

But you won't create a life that matters much,
 you won't make a contribution that counts, and
 your legacy will be one of brokenness and disappointments.

Jesus said there are two ways to live.

John 10.11-13: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

The hired hand,
 he's free to run off when the wolf comes.
 Why – because he has no sense of ownership for the sheep.

I know the saying and I know it's true.
 Once you own something,
 it begins to own you.

And so some guys never really “own” their marriage.
 They never “own” what it means to be a father.
 They never “own” what it means to be a follower of Jesus.
 They never “own” what it means to be faithful
 or what it really means to be a man.

They aren't shepherds in the most important parts of their lives,
so when life gets hard, and
the wolf comes,
they are free to run away.

And they think that's freedom.

But true freedom isn't doing whatever you want to do.
True freedom is wanting to do what you should do.

And if you don't yet want to do what you should do,
you do it any way,
because you're a man.

And to a man
being responsible and fulfilling his commitments
is more important than some childish idea of what it means to be free.

So, Glenn Holland tells the beautiful young girl who appeals to his ego
and to his libido,
that he can't go with her to New York,
and instead he goes home to his wife
and says, "I love you."

And though it takes him way too long,
he gets over his disappointment,
and he expresses his love for his deaf son,
and sings to him John Lennon's song, "Beautiful Boy."

And somewhere along the way,
he becomes a teacher.

He stays late
and he works more than he has to
and he doesn't give up on the kids who need lots and lots of help,
not because he's getting paid,
but because he has become a shepherd.

He owns his role as a compass for young lives,
 and their hopes and their hurts and their hearts
 begin to own him.
 And he finds that makes life rich and good.

So, the question is:
 Are you a hired hand or are you a shepherd?

Hired hands are safe and free.
 But they are never heroes
 because when the wolf comes,
 emotionally and sometimes physically,
 they run away.

Your work,
 your marriage,
 your children,
 your spiritual growth and your walk with Christ,
 you – hired hand or shepherd?

Free – or responsible?

Lightness – or weight?

2. PEOPLE MATTER MOST.

Men tend to be doers.
 We value making things happen and getting things done.
 When we hang out together,
 it's so we can do something.

We don't get together or call each other on the phone just to talk –
 that would be silly.
 That's what women do.

And we don't leave 20 minute messages on voicemail that begin,
Well, I guess you're not in right now,
but I was running some errands
and I thought of you,
and you won't believe who I just now saw,
and by the way little Kimsey did the cutest thing last night ...

But here's one thing we guys have to get straight.
Life is about relationships,
and people matter.
More than our accomplishments,
more than our work,
more than our stuff,
people matter most.

Who teaches Mr. Holland this lessons?
Well, among others, Coach Meister,
who wants one of his athletes in the band
so he can get enough academic credits to be eligible for the wrestling
team.

But it's not working out,
and the band director is about to pull the plug on the kid.

Clip: Ch 11 49.46 – 51.36

My dad was a band director.
His official title was The Supervisor of Instrumental Music
for the Texas City Independent School System.

For all the jokes about Texas City,
because of the petroleum plants there,
we had a great tax base,
and my father had a large staff
and a huge band.

And he won just about every award a band director could win.
You can read about him if you go to his bio
on the Texas Bandmasters Hall of Fame.

Here's a picture of him and my mother
when they were in their 80's
and they were back in Texas City
because the new band hall had been named after him
and the Mayor had declared it Bob Renfroe Day.

Picture: Bob Renfroe

My dad was a stud.
Not only did his bands always receive the highest ratings
and not only did they win all kinds of contests,
but this average guy at home,
when he put on a tux
and stood before a band,
he became the most elegant of men,
and his directing was so beautiful,
it was like a work of art.

I go see the Houston Symphony at the Pavilion,
and my dad was much more graceful and artistic in his directing.

But that's not why I admire him most.

He arrived in Texas City to direct the Jr. High band
when he was 19.
That was the year after the explosion that killed 600 people.

And everyone knew someone,
a parent,
a relative,
a friend
who had been killed.

And Dad came into that hurting community,
and had his band practice some days,
marching up and down Main Street,
so people would stop their cars,
and come out of their houses,
and leave their shopping for a few minutes,
and look out and see those young kids
and remember that's why we have to keep trying –
there's a future to live for.

In the sixties, race relations were difficult in Texas City,
like they were in most southern cities.
And there was a trumpet player,
his name was Marvin Peterson,
but dad called him Pete.

He wasn't the best trumpet player in the band,
not technically,
but he played with more feeling than anyone.

And dad made certain that at football games,
Pete would be featured in a solo.
And kids in the stands,
black and white,
would call out,
“Let Pete play,”
and dad wouldn't hear them
until they were screaming and begging.
and Pete's had been called out a hundred times.

Only then would Dad call Pete forward and strike up the band.

Dad made certain Pete went to what was then known as
North Texas State University,
which had one of the finest jazz programs in the country.

Picture of Pete Peterson. – younger and older

And long story short,
Pete,
who now goes by the name of Hannibal,
became a renowned jazz musician
who has written over 150 compositions
including operas and masses.
You can read about him on his Wikipedia page
where my father is mentioned by name.

Hannibal's oratorio *African Portraits*,
was premiered in Carnegie Hall
and has been performed 55 times by major orchestras,
including the Chicago Symphony.
I attended the performance in Houston,
where he thanked my father as one of his mentors.

Four other former students,
not as talented as Pete,
also African Americans,
when they were at the University of Houston,
they asked my father to loan them money,
because they needed a vehicle they could haul their equipment in
because they were playing at clubs around town
to pay for college.

It didn't make any sense financially,
but those were his guys,
and they needed someone to believe in them,
so he gave them the money.

Dad died three years ago at the age of 91.
Hannibal played at his service,
a jazz version of Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

He also spoke about how during those turbulent times,
when he didn't know if he would be beaten up walking to school,
the band hall was his safe space and
my father was the one who made him feel that way.

He also told this story at the funeral that I had never heard.

Story of Dad and the principal.

Thirty years after Dad finishes teaching,

I might be doing a wedding or a funeral or speaking at another church,
and someone would come up to me and say,
“Are you Bob Renfroe’s boy?”

And once I said that I was,

it was either a former band student,
or another director who had been young when my father
was in the prime of his career,
and they would say not what a great conductor he was,
but they would say, “Let me tell you how your father helped me.”

I could tell you a hundred stories.

But this is what I want you to hear.

My dad worked hard.

And he worked his kids hard.

He didn’t put up with any foolishness.

And he yelled too much when we messed up in rehearsal.

And his band doing well

and his succeeding was important to him.

And he reached the pinnacle of his profession.

But what I admire most

and what makes him a hero

is that he cared about people.

He loved his kids,

and wanted the best for them,

and he cared about other band directors,

and he helped them anyway he could.

You remember from the movie *Gertrude Lang*.
The poor clarinet student who sounded like she was torturing an animal
every time she tried to play.
And Mr. Holland gives her special time and lessons.

And here's another time he learns something that changes his heart.

Clip: Ch. 5. 19.46 – 21.27.

Everyone has hopes.
Everyone has hurts.
Everyone wants to be good at something.
Everyone needs to believe they have something special to give.

People carry burdens and pressures
and live with fears and needs and insecurities
that we don't know anything about.

But everyone you meet has an inner life that you don't know anything about.
And everyone needs someone
who will listen to them,
and believe in them
and help them.

And guys, this may not sound very manly,
but there's nothing more important that we can do with our lives.
Because people matter.

At the center of all that is,
there is the heart of a God who says people matter.
They matter enough
to send his Son to die upon a cross.

You matter that much.
And every person you meet matters that much.

3. LITTLE MOMENTS MAKE A BIG LIFE.

In the John Lennon song that Mr. Holland sings to his son Cole, there is the line:

John Lennon: Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.

That's not a bad summary of Mr. Holland's Opus. His plan was always to complete his symphony and to become rich and famous.

But then life happens.

Usually the plan is something big.
And then everything will be different.

But most often what makes a big life
are little acts,
small investments,
repeated over and over.

Investments in people,
investments in things that matter,
often in ways that are small,
maybe not even seen or noticed,
but we look back
and we have created a body of work,
an opus, if you will,
that's all that opus means – work –
we look back and we have created
an opus that is worthy of admiration, and
a legacy that is worthy of our lives.

True success in every important area of life
doesn't go to the fastest starters,
or the persons with the greatest intellect
or the most talent,
or the most charming personalities.

True success comes to the person who does the right things,
usually small things,
over and over.

Successful marriages,
successful fathering,
successful friendship,
success in character and integrity,
success spiritually,
I wish they could all be accomplished
with one huge act.
But they can't be.

Life – you win at life,
by doing the right thing,
the loving thing,
the generous thing,
the sacrificial thing,
again and again and again.

Big lives are created not when we have one big moment,
but when we continue to be faithful,
and when we continue to invest our lives in the things that matter,
even when they're small,
even when they're not noticed or appreciated.

Big things happen in little places and in little ways and in little moments.
And great legacies are the harvest we reap
when over a lifetime
we invest our lives time and time again in the things that mattered.

And then one day you'll look back
 and see that while you were making other plans
 your life happened.
 And if you can look back
 on the ways that you cared, and
 on the ways that you sacrificed, and
 on the ways that you forgot yourself
 to put someone else first,
 you will discover that you have lived well,
 and your legacy is worthy of the life you were given.

Clip Montage

Ch 11 52.11-53.02, 53.13-53.49 fade out, 33.43 – 35.03 fade out, ch 21
 1.54.21- 1.55.13

Mr. Holland's opus – one reviewer said,
 Mr. Holland's opus is a generous life.

I subtitled this session: A Hero Unawares.
 When Mr. Holland walked into the auditorium,
 he was shocked.
 Why would people gather to celebrate his life?

He had never done anything all that special.
 He had just been a teacher.
 And he had just done what all good teachers would do.

It strikes me that's how heroes think.
 They don't do things to be noticed or to be appreciated
 or to be heroic.
 They just do what they do because,
 it's right.

Last thought.

You know this passage.

Jesus describes the final judgment.

Matthew 25.34-40: Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

What strikes me is that the righteous are taken unawares.

But, Lord, when did we do these things for you?

It was just a meal.

It was just a visit to let someone know I was thinking about him.

It was just an invitation to join in and belong.

It was just a four-day trip to Honduras
to pour concrete and build a house.

It was just a few weekends every year
working with the church’s prison ministry.

It was just a few hours every other week with foster kids,
listening to their stories and praying with them.

It was just – just a little investment in someone else’s life.

But a lifetime of little things and little investments
done for what matters most,
that builds a big life
and it creates heroes unawares.