

Column

Before starting school, my mother would read to me as we sat on the swing on our front porch. Often, she read Bible stories, but other literature as well. One story she read was the story of Sam Davis, a young man in the Confederate Army who chose hanging rather than to betray his comrades. He was 21 at the time.

I remember being puzzled by ‘hanging’. I asked her to explain, and she described the gruesome process, but even then, I am not sure I took it all in. I did, however, get the point of the story: young men, myself included, should follow Sam Davis’ example of courage, loyalty and honor.

I had almost forgotten about this young man who has gone down in history as “the boy hero of the Confederacy” until as an adult I came across a magazine article about his life. Upon reading it, I understood why my mother thought it important I know about Sam Davis.

Davis was born Oct. 6, 1842, near Smyrna, Tenn. In 1861, when his home state declared itself independent, he left the Western Military Academy in Nashville where he had been studying and enlisted as a private in the First Tennessee Infantry.

After completing his training, he was sent to Virginia, where he served under both Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. In 1863, he became a member of the Coleman Scouts, an outfit charged with getting information about Union soldiers who were moving from Middle Tennessee towards Chattanooga.

While returning from a mission, members of the Union army captured Davis. A search revealed papers in the soles of his boots and saddle pertaining to the movement of the Northern troops. He was taken to Pulaski, Tenn., where he was court marshalled and condemned to die.

On Nov. 27, 1863, he was executed, but not before Union General Grenville M. Dodge offered Davis his freedom in return for revealing the source of his information. Davis refused. His last words

were: “If I had a thousand lives, I would give them all here before I would betray a friend.”

The War Between the States, this period of rending in our national life, brought about unimaginable suffering and bloodshed. In some cases, it divided families and was a hellish time for those who answered their country’s call and served on both sides. Upwards to 700,000 died. Yet, difficult circumstances show the stuff of which a man is made.

This was true in the life of Sam Davis. Two verses of scripture come to mind. The first is Philippians 4:8: “Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest [honorable], whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” Davis ended his life in the spirit of these words.

The second verse comes from Psalm 105:18: “The iron entered into his soul.” Here the psalmist is commenting on the life of Joseph in the Old

Testament. His brothers sold him into slavery. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. He was thrown in jail. Yet he let none of these things defeat him. Rather, with God's help, they made him strong. The same was true in the life of Sam Davis. Trouble revealed the stuff of which he was made. It brought out the noblest of qualities. May it be so in our lives.

Courage, loyalty and honour may be old fashioned virtues, but O how we need them today. Some things are worth dying and living for, of which these are three.

ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Collect for the 13th Sunday after Trinity, the Book of Common Prayer)

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