Sunday, September 3, 1995
GOD'S CELEBRITIES
Mark 9:30-37

In this past month of August 1995, two American celebrities died: Mickey Mantle and Jerry Garcia. Stories about their careers and the grief of their devoted followers filled the newspapers and other news media for several days. As I read about some of the responses, especially to Jerry Garcia's death by some of his fans, it almost seemed as if God had died. In contrast, one newspaper reporter wrote—"Both individuals were self-indulgent stars whose early deaths were brought on by their childish inability to 'just say no.'"

I suppose it shows my age and my taste in music, but until I read about his death, I knew very little about Jerry Garcia's music and his group, The Grateful Dead. In fact, when I first heard the news that Jerry Garcia, a heroin addict, had died in his sleep at a drug rehab center in Northern California, I didn't recognize the name. Then I was surprised to learn that last year, Grateful Dead business enterprises earned more than 70 million dollars, 52 million from touring alone, and that the band's mail order catalog draws an estimated 20 million in annual orders. Garcia had a top-selling line of ties and his own flavor of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, Cherry Garcia. Then I discovered that I have two Garcia neckties that were given to me as gifts, but I had no idea until now that there was any connection. I've also eaten Cherry Garcia ice cream but didn't know the origin of the name of its flavor.

Because of my age, I know a little more about Mickey Mantle and his baseball career. He retired from baseball in 1969 and kind of disappeared from the news. Then, because of his failing health and the suddenness of his liver transplant, he was in the news again before he died. Before he received his new liver, he said, "If I had known that I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself."

I mention these two celebrities only as illustrations of a larger problem in our culture. We live in a society that seems to have lost its capacity for distinguishing between positive role models — individuals who are truly heroes or heroines — and celebrities or entertainers. It's also a bit of a mystery to me why so many people seem to worship celebrities, some of whom are very good entertainers. One hunch I have is that rather than taking the energy and initiative to develop their own unique talent and potential, celebrity worshipers try to live their lives vicariously through others.

Parenthetically, the difference between celebrities and entertainers who become celebrities is that an entertainer is someone who can actually do something, someone who has a verifiable skill or talent. Both Mickey Mantle and Jerry Garcia were in that category, whereas Vanna White is a celebrity without being an entertainer. The best definition of a celebrity is that a celebrity is a person who is known for being known.

The place of the entertainer-celebrity at the center of our national consciousness cannot be overstated. For example, several years ago, everything to do with basketball player Michael Jordan, from his golf bets to his relatives, was obsessive national news. The disappearance and murder of Jordan's father made headlines for weeks; on the day, soon after the murder, when Jordan retired from basketball, NBC anchored its nightly newscast from where Jordan spoke. As another example, now we have the O.J. Simpson trial.

The preoccupation with entertainer-celebrities is a measure of how society has changed. One commentator wrote, “Where once Americans cheered for people who represented character traits they would like to embody and who had achieved greatness they would like to rival, we now cheer mainly for people who amuse us. Being entertained is plainly a shallower pursuit than being inspired. Moreover, it is a self-absorbed and inward one, a pursuit centered on the personal and usually the passive side of life.” We don’t have to do anything except be a devoted fan. We are not inspired to heroic action. Too many only want to follow along and bask in the glory of the celebrity.

Or maybe we haven’t changed so much after all. Jesus had the same problem with some who wanted to follow him. They simply wanted to accompany him and not do much else. In fact, Jesus did his best to reject celebrity status for himself and to discourage that kind of follower. When he healed someone because of his love and compassion, he instructed the person who had been healed to tell no one. He didn’t want to become famous as a healer. He didn’t want people following him for the wrong reasons. And when some of the people who had been healed wanted to tag along with him, he told them to go back home and be of service to others. After he finished telling the story of the Good Samaritan, he told the man who had asked the question which prompted the story to “go and do likewise.”

So the first point of the sermon is that it’s okay to admire other people for their talent and ability, whether it be in music, baseball, basketball, or some other field. I enjoy talented entertainers as much as anyone. But it’s even more important to develop your own unique talent and potential so that you can be of service to others. God wants you to be you and not someone else. Furthermore, it’s important to distinguish between celebrities and role models. Because an individual is a celebrity, even a celebrity-entertainer, that does not automatically mean that person is the kind of person you want to be the role model for your life.

Secondly, Jesus taught that God evaluates you and me according to a different set of standards than that which our culture normally uses. God’s celebrities, if we can call them that, are quite different from the world’s celebrities.

God’s celebrities are mostly unknown to the wider public. And Jesus encouraged that. He taught that it is best to do your good deeds in secret, to not even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

This was a difficult lesson even for the closest disciples of Jesus to learn. Take the story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark as an example. One day, Jesus had been trying to explain to his disciples that he would be arrested, put on trial, and then executed. But he also told them, this would not be the end, for on the third day, he would rise again.

The disciples, however, did not understand or maybe didn’t want to understand what he was talking about. They liked things the way they were. Jesus was popular among the masses of people, and they, his closest followers, were gaining some attention. Some of his fame was rubbing off on them, and they liked it. They even began to speculate among themselves as to which of them was the greatest.

No doubt beneath the disciples’ question was a deeper one. They were asking as individuals, “Am I a significant person?” “Do I have worth?” “Would anyone miss me if I were no longer here?”

Like us, they had observed that in society at large, certain people seem to be considered of more value than others. And they wondered, “Am I of value to anyone?” “Does anyone appreciate me?” “How can I gain more value in my eyes and in the eyes of others?”

I believe that much of our self-doubt, much of our worry about whether or not we are significant or have any value, results from a false system we use in judging human worth, that of ourselves and others. It’s part of the same false system that gives an individual celebrity status.

One way we give worth or value to people today is by how much money one makes or how much wealth one possesses. If we can say or think to ourselves, “I make more money than you,” then we go on to assume that we have more value than someone who makes less. We confuse monetary worth with self-worth.

Another false indicator of human worth or value, and which is part of becoming a celebrity in our culture, is how well a person is known — how much attention has the media given that individual. As I said earlier, the best definition of a celebrity is a person who is known for being known.

Here’s an illustration. Recently I came across an article about leadership in the African-American community in our country. The writer’s thesis was that those commanding the most media attention are not necessarily the most respected leaders or role models.

For example, the largest African American congregation in this country is the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York. It has more than 10,000 members. In an effort to serve its community, the church runs an elementary school that enrolls 200 pupils; a nursing home for 121 people; an apartment complex housing 30 senior citizens; a development fund with an endowment of one million dollars that dispenses money to selected neighborhood enterprises; and a credit union. Yet not many people beyond the neighborhood have heard of the church or the Rev. Gardner Taylor, the man who presided over its tremendous growth from the mid-1950s until his retirement in 1990. Nor has anyone heard much about the Rev. Gary Simpson, who replaced Mr. Taylor as Concord’s senior minister.

Six blocks from this church, another African American minister, the Rev. Al Sharpton, manages to stay front and center in the news. Yet he leads no regular church congregation of any size, let alone one that operates the range of services run by Concord Baptist. A search of media coverage shows that there have been 20 times as many articles on Mr. Sharpton than Mr. Taylor at Concord Baptist.

When Jesus learned that his disciples had been discussing among themselves who was the greatest, he called them together and said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” God evaluates us quite differently from the way we look at ourselves and others.

As I said earlier, God’s celebrities, unlike our celebrities, rarely if ever make the news. They do their good works quietly and unobtrusively, not looking for fame or reward.

Sometimes, however, you can read about such unknown people in the back pages of newspapers. One such story on a back page of an east coast newspaper reported the death of four senior members of St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in Paterson, New Jersey. They were all killed in an automobile accident by a 24-year-old drunk driver who drove toward their

van from the wrong direction on the parkway. The reporter in this case took the time to uncover how important these women were in the life of that small church community.

Evelyn Dotson, 80, brought meat pies three times a week to a 97-year-old. Henrietta E. Lathan, 73, phoned another member of the congregation every day after that member had five heart operations. Jeanne Ruth Sanford, 69, helped a mentally ill former church member pay his bills. And young Gwendolyn King, 62, made sloppy joes for 50 children every Saturday in their troubled neighborhood. Here are four examples of God's celebrities.

These women were achievers on their own. They stayed on as the church dwindled from 200 members to 50, most of them older or infirm. The reporter who wrote the story knew she could report on only a fraction of all these four women and their church accomplished for their forlorn neighborhood. But they brought life, and they represent life.

Henrietta E. Lathan's son said that his mother always wanted to make sure that he stayed in the church, that he gave something back. She always said, "Never forget where you came from."

God's celebrities are millions of forgotten people as far as the world is concerned — people who are always ready and willing to reach out a helping hand and who never seek or want publicity for their efforts. God's celebrities are the countless people who are faithful day in and day out, who keep their commitments, and who treat other people, no matter what their station in life, with dignity and respect.

God's celebrities do most of their good deeds in secret. Today, I invite you to become a true celebrity, one of God's celebrities. Amen.