

“Cloud of Witnesses”

Luke 6/Hebrews 12
All Saints' Sunday

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Christ the King Lutheran Church
November 6, 2016

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

This past Wednesday, about 100 or more of us from here at Christ the King gathered together in the fireside room and chapel to share our stories of the saints. We sang, we offered prayers, we lit candles, we rang bells. And we remembered. We remembered those saints who had gone before us in this life, who have claimed the promise of eternal life with God. We drew icons, and shared stories, too, of those living saints still among us who encourage us and model a way to live life in this cruel, crazy, beautiful world—and especially how to listen to the voice of Jesus in the midst of some many other competing and compelling voices and worldviews out there. As we shared these stories, many of us put these images of the saint beside us up on the walls of the chapel to form that cloud of witnesses, a visual reminder of those folks we can't always see, and sometime need to be reminded are there. In many ways, that commemoration of All Saints day, begun on Tuesday and Wednesday continues today, to this All saints Sunday, as we prepare to again remember those saint among us who have died, as well as those who continue to mentor us right here, right now.

The texts assigned for All Saints Sunday—sometimes called the beatitudes—help us to identify some of the ways both the saints beside us and the saints before us are blessed and continue to be a blessing to us. For me, though, I think this passage from Hebrews more clearly captures an image of how we view the saints of God.

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. This cloud includes some of those folks are considered saints by a wide swath of the Church (capital “C”) of every time and every place. They are Apostles like Peter, James and John, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, and Lydia. They are reformer and renewers of the church over the eons—people like Francis and Claire; Martin of Tours, Martin Luther and Martin Luther King; Teresa of Avilla and Teresa of Calcutta.

This cloud also contains saints who are much closer to home—much more meaningful to us personally. Saints like my grandmother, Martha Pedersen Lokensgard, a woman of quiet, humble, but intense, deep faith. A woman who taught me perhaps more the centrality of faith. Taught me about caring for others. Taught me to literally put my money where my mouth is—living frugally and simply while at the very same time giving generously and even sacrificially

for the work of the gospel, whether tithing in her own local church context or giving even beyond that elsewhere. Saints like Dr. Robert Harry Smith, my seminary advisor and mentor, who survived one of the most heart-wrenching schisms in the history of the Lutheran Church in the USA, and yet emerged on the other side of it with dozens of his exiled colleagues pointing beyond themselves, beyond the trappings of their traditions, beyond even any sense of institutional or denominational loyalty to the work of the gospel—to love and care for all God's people. Who are the saints that surround you? Take some time later to share their names with someone today.

The second part of this passage from Hebrews challenges us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Now, many folks over the years have used the metaphor of a race to describe the Christian life of faith, saying in one way or another that discipleship, following Jesus is like a race. I happen to like the “running the race” image, even if it has its own limitations or need further qualifiers. For instance, I believe that if we are going to talk about our discipleship, our Christian life as a race, we should really think of it as more like a marathon than a sprint. It seems inherent in the Hebrews text: that the life of Christian discipleship doesn't just require speed or quickness or strength, but also perseverance. There's a sense of building up one's endurance, of pacing oneself that seems to be more akin to training for a marathon than running a sprint. Being in it for the long haul requires such a different attitude—physically, mentally, emotionally and yes, spiritually. Actually, at the risk of totally pushing the metaphor to and beyond its natural limits, this life of following Jesus is not just more like a marathon than a sprint, it's actually more like a triathlon, or even a decathlon. This sort of training takes time, is on-going, and has everything to do with pace, endurance, perseverance, and variety.

Two of the saints among us that I have gotten to know a bit during these past three years—and even more so in the past couple of months—are Pastor Paul and Dorothy Olson. Many of you know Pastor Paul and Dorothy much better than I ever will, but for those who don't Pastor Paul was the founding pastor of Christ the King, and Dorothy his partner, particularly in the earliest days of ministry here, but truly throughout their life and ministry together, right on up to today. Pastor Paul served here for 36 years, from the earliest door-knocking days, through the dedication of all of our current space, and the addition of dozens of staff members and thousands of members over the years.

In my conversations with them—with Dorothy doing most of the talking these days, but Pastor Paul often chiming in with a few whispered words, lots of nods and smiling affirmations, despite his rather advance Parkinsons. Especially recently, they have described to me their work that was designed to be done over the long-haul, an ever-changing ministry as Christ the King when from a few

dozen charter members to a membership in the thousands, as it grew with a growing and changing community, outpacing it even at times, and as it continued to evolve and develop over the years. “Our ministry in 1997 was so different from that of 1985, 1972 or 1961,” Dorothy once told me, “how couldn’t it have been?” She added rhetorically. Seeing this ministry through all of the changes, challenges, opportunities and obstacles required pacing, endurance, and incredible flexibility and agility in the face of these changes. It required running the race with perseverance, way back then, and perhaps even more so today. Of course, more than anything, Dorothy added—to which Pastor Paul nodded his head most actively—more than anything, it required keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus out there ahead of us at all times.

Which is a perfect segue to the third portion of this passage from Hebrews: “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” See, the thing about all of these saints, the big time official saints as well as all of the saints in our own lives of faith, we don’t believe that they are actually super-Christians. As one familiar maxim has put it, these saints are simply *ordinary* people through whom God was able to do *extraordinary* things. So, while we might honor the saints, we don’t pray to them. While we are encouraged by these saints, we don’t worship them. As Lutherans, we celebrate the saints, both living and dead, *primarily* because their lives point toward Jesus—their example directs our eyes beyond ourselves, beyond them, even, and to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Of course if that is true, then the opposite has to be true, too. If these people’s lives don’t point beyond themselves towards Jesus and all that he represents, then they probably aren’t saints. Or if we broaden this out to all aspects of our life together as a congregation, following the example of the saint who continually look to Jesus, as pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we can also say that if there’s something we’re doing that is not understood to be pointing toward Jesus, we probably should stop doing it.

If there is something in our ministry that’s not pointing toward Jesus, no matter how long it’s been there or who started it or why, it probably shouldn’t be in our budget, nor should we support it with our offerings.

And if we know of someone whose words and witness don’t point beyond themselves toward the common good, toward the possibility of a better world, toward all of the things that Jesus stood for, his teachings, his example, how he loves all people, how he forgives and accepts all people, how he reconciles and restores all people to himself. If someone seems to point away from and not toward Jesus (or at least a Christ-like attitude), then we probably shouldn’t vote for that person, either.

These saints of the past and present have glimpsed God's world breaking into our own, and have handed on to us, in one way or another, a witness to that same truth, encouraging us to follow our calling here in God's world, as we point beyond ourselves and as we consider all people to be God's people.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, [...] let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Thanks be to God for all the saints. AMEN.