

“Surrounded By a Great Cloud of Witnesses”

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” Hebrews 12:1

All Saints' Service of Worship

Hebrews 12:1-3
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 1, 2015

As you know, November 1 on the liturgical church calendar is **All Saints' Day**, the day after All Hallows' Eve, or Halloween. And because November 1 falls on a Sunday this year, I wanted to dedicate this service of worship to the themes common to this day.

One of the most prominent themes of All Saints' Day is remembering and honoring our loved ones and friends who have passed away. And that leads to another theme, reflecting upon our own mortality. Except for funerals and memorial services, most churches, at least Presbyterian ones, don't talk much about death and dying, and usually even less about the afterlife. However, **thinking, coping and dealing with issues surrounding death are not morbid, neither are they something we should avoid exploring and talking about.** In fact, when we remember our own mortality, we often better recognize how precious life is – from all of creation itself to the life of others, including our own life.

In the Christian tradition, the Apostle Paul reminds us in the book of Romans, “If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord; **so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's**” (Romans 14:8). And in his first letter to the Thessalonians, he directly addresses the issue of death and grief. Seeking to provide words of assurance, comfort and hope to that congregation, he wrote, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, **so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope**” (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

It was not Paul's intention to restrain the natural sorrow and grief that people of faith feel at the death of a loved one. He indeed recognizes that we rightly grieve and mourn the loss of those who have passed away. This is exactly how Jesus responded when he heard the news about the death of his friend Lazarus. In the shortest verse in the entire Bible, John 11:35, it simply states, “**Jesus wept.**” **And so do we. As people of faith, however, Paul reminds us that our grief is not to be swallowed up by hopelessness.**

Perhaps the greatest promise of hope to be reminded of at death of a loved one, or of anyone for that matter, is the belief that **death does not have the final word - that there is life beyond life. And though no one knows exactly what that will be like, we believe that it is spent eternally in loving presence of God.**

Another scriptural promise that we rightfully hold dear is the belief that **nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God – not even death.**

There are many scripture passages that I could have chosen as the text for this sermon, but I chose the Hebrews 12 passage because of its fairly familiar phrase about being **“surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”** It speaks words of comfort about **those who have passed away, as well as to those of us in the here and now who feel surrounded by the love of others when we are in need, or sick, or dying.** I often refer to this phrase when visiting people in the hospital. And thanks to the genuine compassion and authentic concern by you here in this congregation, persons confirm that they indeed feel surrounded by the “great cloud of witnesses” known as College Hill. That’s one reason why I encourage anyone to be connected with a community of faith. And with deep gratitude, I have experienced that in my own life.

Though this phrase can be interpreted in a few different ways, we first need to understand it in the context of this particular book of the Bible. As it turns out, the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews spends all of Chapter 11, the previous chapter, recalling the faithfulness of Old Testament biblical characters who had gone before. A who’s who of Old Testament men and women are listed, accompanied by a reflection on how their life of faith impacted the Hebrew people. Therefore **in its biblical context, the “great cloud of witnesses” referred to those ancestors considered to be pillars of the faith.** But it’s more than an exercise of simple remembrance. The author wants us to gain inspiration and strength for our own journey of life and faith by reflecting on the examples of how our predecessors lived their lives.

The scripture writer uses a metaphor common in that day and time, comparing living a life of faith with running a race, noting how important it is that we persevere with endurance. And in order to do that, we are called to lay aside anything that is weighing us down, just as a runner does. **What can you let go of in your life so that you aren’t so burdened and weighed down?**

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, the “great a cloud of witnesses” has been expanded to include all the faithful throughout time, including our own family ancestors. This is what is basically understood when we use the term **“saints.”** For those of us who are part of the Protestant wing of Christianity, this includes *all* persons of faith, not just those persons the Roman Catholic Church has lifted to the official status of “canonized sainthood.”

The “great cloud of witnesses” has further been understood as our own family members who have died and gone to heaven, as those who have finished their race and are now sitting in the bleachers and grandstands, so to speak, watching and cheering us on as we run the race of faith that they once ran. While that can indeed be an inspirational thought for many, that particular interpretation is actually a bit of a stretch, because the Bible is silent as to the exact state of the afterlife.

Again, as comforting as it is to many, perhaps yourself, **there is nothing in the Bible that clearly states that our departed loved ones look down from heaven and watch what we are doing and pray on our behalf.** Which leads to the question: What is heaven anyway? Well, that’s another sermon. Yet one of the Bible passages that I almost always read at a funeral or memorial service is from John 14, where the gospel writer has Jesus declare, “I go and prepare a place for you...so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). From that, and from the story of the resurrection of Jesus, which many progressives see as metaphorical in nature, not literal, I join with those who believe that death does not have the final word, that there is life beyond this life. And again, though know one knows for sure what that life will be like, we believe it is one spent eternally in the loving presence of God. Yet I suppose that even that is conjecture

– for we have no proof. So, as they say, that's what faith simply leads many of us to believe. And, there are some people of faith who believe that there is nothing for us as individuals after we die.

So **perhaps it's best to not make definitive theological proclamations about that which we simply do not know.** In an age when so many people are seeking absolute answers, the most honest response is that **there is much about God and the spiritual life that remains a mystery.**

I want to mention a few other things we derive from Protestant theology concerning the afterlife. First is **the belief that when we die we are immediately united with God.** Unlike traditional Roman Catholic teaching, Protestants don't believe in purgatory, some kind of holding place before Judgment Day. **Nor, also according to traditional Protestant theology based on scripture, are there ghosts, as defined as loved ones that are still hanging around nearby in some kind of spiritual state before crossing over to the other side. But many do believe that, and they (and that might include you) have the right to that belief.** For just as Jesus' disciples experienced his continuing presence after his death, many of us have experienced the continuing presence of our loved ones after their death.

This particular experience even has pre-Christian roots, and it has led to what has become All Saint's Day. To learn more about that we turn to what many in this congregation have been studying and practicing lately, Celtic spirituality. The Celtic or Gaelic peoples of what is now the British Isles, primarily in Ireland, based much of their life and spirituality around a solar calendar that celebrated the four seasons. The ancient festival of Samhain (pronounced 'sow-inn'), traditionally celebrated from sunset on October 31 to sunset on November 1, marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter, and was regarded by most as the "Celtic New Year."

Going back to pre-Christian times, before Christianity reached the British Isles, **the Celtic people believed that it was during this particular moment of the year that the boundary between this world and the Otherworld could more easily be crossed.** Offerings of food and drink were left outside for these visiting spirits. The souls of the dead were also thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality. There were many other customs associated with this festival, including the wearing of costumes or disguises and visiting neighbors.

It wasn't until the year 835 CE that Pope Gregory IV sought to replace or usurp this pagan festival with a church-sanctioned holiday, All Saints Day, on November 1. The day before, All Hallows' Eve, later known as Halloween, continued however to remain a day filled with myth and superstition surrounding the dead. And as I mentioned in the Time With the Children, other cultures, like Mexico's Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) have found their own ways of remembering and honoring their departed loved ones.

In essence, however, all these different beliefs stand as a strong **reminder of the spiritual nature of life.** And, according to Christian teaching, there is a destiny for us where we are assured of a continuing existence. Ultimately, then, **we acknowledge that God's love stretches far beyond death.**

So on this particular day, **let us give thanks and honor for our own ancestors and loved ones who have run and finished the race now placed before each of us.**

At this time, please find the *Litany of Remembrance* inserted in your bulletin, and remain seated. Let us now our join hearts, minds, and spirits together as we reflect upon the life and love of those who have gone before us.



Litany of Remembrance

on All Saints' Sunday • 2015



We remember the great ancestors of our faith,
from Abraham and Sarah, to Paul and Phoebe:

Ancestors of the faith, we remember you.

We remember the prophets and priests,
the ministers and teachers who have taught us the ways of God:

Teachers of the faith, we remember you.

We remember our grandparents and parents, aunts and uncles,
those who have gone before us in our lifetime:

Family of our faith, we remember you.

We lift up the memories of children and grandchildren,
brothers and sisters, husbands and wives and parents
whose lives ended too soon:

Those close in our heart, we remember you.

We lift up to you, O God,
the names of those we have lost in this past year from our
congregation, knowing that they are with your heart forever.
As we read these names, we will pause after every name
to remember, pray, and give thanks for their life and love.

• Rev. Dr. Chuck Kriner

We pause now for a moment to silently remember and
celebrate the life and love of those of those dear to us,
those who hold a special place in our hearts.

- Moment of silence -

**Family of God, we remember you, and we honor you.
We know you are with us in the spirit of worship,
and you will not be forgotten.**

We give thanks, O God,
for all who have gone on to join with you beyond this life.

**We know that in our grief and celebration, O God,
you are with us through it all, and we are not left alone.
In the name of Christ, in whom love lives forever, we pray.**



Amen.

~ written by Rev. Mindi on her Rev-o-lution.org website.