

Remembering & Acknowledging a Great Cloud of Witnesses

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

Hebrews 12:1-2a
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Earlier this month on Sunday, November 2, the day after All Saint's Day, we remembered and honored those in our community of faith who have passed away this year: Polly Kelly, Jack Robertson, and Charles Stanford. And I need to add Nancy Foote, who passed away toward the end of last year. Therefore, today I'd like for us to reflect upon some of the **themes of All Saints' Day**. I would have done so the past two Sundays but those were our special Stewardship Emphasis and Commitment Sundays.

In addition to remembering and honoring our loved ones, another theme involves **reflecting upon our own mortality**, something we also do on Ash Wednesday at the beginning of the season of Lent. 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. But with the coming winter months, as leaves are already dying and falling from trees, we are reminded of the **cycle of the seasons**, the cycle of life, death, and impending new life. Therefore, reflecting upon and addressing issues surrounding death and dying are not morbid, neither are they something we should avoid exploring and talking about. After all, if the church doesn't, who does? In fact, **when we remember our own mortality we often better recognize how precious life is – our own lives, our relationships with others, and our connection with all of creation.**

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, Paul 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, my siblings, 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 we 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, whether recently or long ago. For this is how Jesus responded when he heard the news about the death of his friend Lazarus. The shortest verse in the entire Bible, John 11:35, 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 the 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 Sacred Presence of the Divine.

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.** Those are words of Paul also found in his letter to the Romans.

While there are many scripture passages that I could have chosen as the text for this message, I chose the Hebrews 12 passage because of it's fairly familiar phrase about being **"surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."** **It speaks words of comfort about those who have passed away, whose presence remains a reality in our lives. Yet, it also speaks to those of us who also feel surrounded by the love and compassion of others who are present in the here and now when we are in need, or sick, or dying.** I regularly refer to this verse when visiting people in the hospital, assuring them that they are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who are praying for and caring deeply about them. And thanks to the genuine compassion and authentic concern by you here in this congregation, persons confirm that they indeed feel surrounded by that "great cloud of witnesses" known as College Hill.

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 Hebrew men and women are listed, accompanied by a reflection on how their life of faith impacted the Hebrew people and their faith. **In it's biblical context, therefore, the "great cloud of witnesses" referred to those ancestors considered to be pillars of their faith tradition.** Who among your ancestors were pillars of faith?

It's more than an exercise of simple remembrance, however. The author wants his readers, which includes 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 of faith.** 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.

This leads to an important question. **What can you and I let go of in our life, and in our life together as a community of faith, so that we aren't so burdened and weighed down?** I and the Ruling Elders on the Session welcome your suggestions.

Throughout the history of the Protestant 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 us, **this includes all persons of faith,** not just those persons the Roman Catholic Church has lifted to the official status of "cannonized sainthood."

This metaphor of running a race relates how the great cloud of witnesses have finished their race and are now sitting in the bleachers and grandstands, so to speak, cheering us on as we run the race of faith that they once ran. While that can indeed be a comforting and inspirational thought and visual image for many, that particular interpretation is actually a bit of a stretch, because **the Bible isn't clear as to the exact state of the afterlife.** And what they did believe is couched in their own cultural and theological understanding at the time. Which leads to the question: What is heaven anyway? Well, that's a message for another time.

Saying that, 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, we join with those who believe that death does not have the final word, that there is life beyond this life. Yet, in an age when so many people are seeking absolute answers – like thinking they know exactly what heaven is like, especially who *is* and who *is not* going to be there - **the most honest response is that there is much about God and the spiritual life and the afterlife which remains a mystery.** As we just heard from Brian McLaren, our Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker a week ago, ambiguity and doubt are healthy and necessary elements of a life of faith! We can acknowledge, however, that just as Jesus' disciples experienced his continuing Presence after his death, most of us have experienced the continuing presence of our loved ones after their death.

In essence, then, **all these different beliefs about the afterlife stand as a strong reminder of the spiritual nature of life.** Ultimately, then, we acknowledge that **God's love stretches even beyond death.** So, let us give thanks and honor for our own ancestors and loved ones who have run and finished the race, a race of a life of faith that each of us are running now. Let us remember, acknowledge, and give thanks for their life and love – their legacy to each one of us. Let each of us also acknowledge and remember that **a great cloud of witnesses surrounds you and I, as well.**

Amen.