

Aldersgate United Methodist Church

November 2, 2025

“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

12 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, ² looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Sermon – All Saints’ Day

“Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.” Our scripture reading this morning is intriguing to me...I find myself wondering what each of us envisions when hearing *we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses*? Is it a heavenly audience of those who have passed away, cheering us on from above? Or perhaps it’s wisdom and memories from those we’ve known or admired, brushing our hearts with loving kindness when we need it most. I’ve heard our “cloud of witnesses” described as the heroes of our faith, encouraging us day-by-day to do something beautiful. Today, we’ve honored just a few of the recently departed, now inspiring us as saints, to do good and to serve God. And we give thanks for the centuries of saints who serve as examples of how God uses ordinary people to bring grace to our world in extortinary and simplistic ways.

The beautiful thing is we've come to define, honor and celebrate the Saints in our various spiritual traditions in numerous ways. Some pray for intercessions, asking saints to pray for them because they are believed to be close to God. Many churches observe specific feast days on the liturgical calendar to commemorate saints. Others attend gravesites or hold special services, lighting candles to honor their memory. And some cultures create altars in their homes with images of saints and loved ones with offerings like flowers and food. And let's not forget how often we use icons and relics, with symbolic attributes like St. Christopher for example (to protect us) or hold us in many of life's situations. We even name churches after saints, and some traditions name children after their patron saint. We as United Methodists have remembrance services and honor the "communion of saints." All these rituals have one thing in common – we seek the example and support of those who have gone before to guide us as we too live to be faithful to God.

"We seek the example and support of those who have gone before to guide us as we too live to be faithful to God." We, ordinary people, journeying together, tripping and picking one another up, brushed by grace in stunningly beautiful and gut-wrenching painful encounters...we seek the example and support of our cloud of witnesses as we live into God's call.

Lutheran pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber became a New York Times best-seller when she invited readers into a surprising encounter with what she calls "a religious but not-so-spiritual life" (speaking about her own rocky faith journey). And in a time when many have rightly been disillusioned with Christianity, she published a book titled *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People* (a stark contrast to how we are often led to believe, by saintly definitions, must be the *right people*.) This morning, I want to tell you about one of my "accidental saints" – a saint that guides me time and time again when I'm struggling or questioning *where the hell is God in all of this* (by "this" I mean life's circumstances)?

His name was Ray, and he was my elderly upstairs neighbor. I was a young thirty-something, living in a walkdown basement apartment of an old brick building on 6th Avenue in Helena. It wasn't much (just what I could afford at the time), and the upstairs

two floors were converted into four individual apartments. Ray lived on the first floor, above the bedroom ceiling side of my dwelling. I tell you this, because every night I could hear him rocking back and forth in his rocking chair. I envisioned him peacefully rocking and perhaps watching television or reading a good book. Our paths crossed at times on the front sidewalk – me racing to work, and he headed out for his daily stroll to Historic Downtown Helena. He never spoke, never made eye-contact and seldom did I feel he was even aware of my presence. Over time, I started to notice something peculiar – you see, by bicycle was chained to the railing at the top of my entry stairwell – and I began noticing freshly picked flowers tucked into the handlebars of the bike. I assumed a friend had placed them there, stopping by sometime when I wasn't home. But one afternoon months later, I noticed Ray standing at the top of the stairwell and suddenly realized HE was my fresh-flower friend.

Fast-forward many more months – on a chilly March evening in 1996, I realized I had not heard Ray's rocking chair for a day or two and I became worried. I contacted the police and requested a welfare check. We discovered Ray had passed away. But the shocking moment for me was stepping into the reality of Ray's world – his apartment was completely empty, apart from the rocking chair and a twin mattress, oh, and an empty carton of milk on the kitchen counter. He had nothing. At the time I worked at the hospital, so I reached out to country coroner (who's path often crossed mine) and asked if Ray had family or if I could help somehow in his funeral planning. What we discovered together was Ray's only income was being "managed" by an appointed guardian, who paid Ray's rent (where the rest of the funds went was a mystery). I suspect Ray's daily walks downtown were to the Senior Center to have a warm meal. Given he had no family or funds, Ray would be buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. However, the coroner went above and beyond to research Ray's life and discovered he had briefly served in the US Army in WWII as a private. As a result, Ray was honored with a full military burial at Fort Harrison with the coroner, me and the honor guard in attendance. Ray is forever in my great cloud of witnesses. Ray reminds me that genuine kindness exists – *tiny wildflowers on bicycle handlebars* – kindness exists in a harsh world, and we all are saints in communion with one another.

The candles on our altar – the light that radiates from these lives, and the lives of so many more – symbolize the warmth our world needs, the illumination our hearts search for, and the promise God holds for all people.

On this special day I'm drawn to the words of Maya Angelou in her poem titled "Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd, Killens, and Mayfield" – it's such an unusual title because it pays tribute to five Black artists who have made significant contributions to culture and history (thus their names as the poems title). Listen to a portion of the poem written for these saints:

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance,
fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
of dark, cold
caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

Today is our opportunity to listen to the whisper of our saints and to embrace our interwoven journeys as God's tapestry unfolding in real time. We may never know, or understand how or why or when saints will speak to us...or even realize that we too are

saints in the making for others to celebrate, or pray to, or seek comfort from. It all comes around to what I shared earlier: *we seek the example and support of those who have gone before to guide us as we too live to be faithful to God.*

Let's remember that the faithful who have gone before us have passed the faith to us. We have an opportunity to lean into their experience and example as we continue to grow closer to God. And as we gather in communion (whether we're questioning seekers or strong believers) – may we be strengthened to journey in faith as one, with our beloved saints in tow. Amen.