

“For All the Saints”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 14, 2016

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

To be a stranger – or an alien, as our popular culture has taken to calling outsiders – is a startling experience. You feel self-conscious because the clothes you wear are unlike what the majority of folks are wearing. You don’t understand any of the native language, and feel overwhelmed attempting to do very simple things, like buying groceries, reading a bus schedule, or finding a doctor. I especially thought of that this week as new students arrived to learn English here at John Knox through the Wayne Township Adult Education Program. These women and men in our community want to be more proficient and less anxious in maneuvering the day-to-day experiences of living in our society.

If you’re on a vacation or short trip, you at least know this anxious feeling will end after a set time. But if you are living outside your native land, your feelings of apprehension start to mount and grow each and every day you remain an alien in that foreign land.

Whenever I read the Letters of Paul or the other New Testament Letters, I am drawn to this image of strangers in a foreign land. The churches Paul and others wrote to were little enclaves of Christianity surrounded by secular strife and persecution. Those early Christians were not part of the established religion that the world recognized as legitimate. Their native tongue of faith was far from what they heard around them in the marketplace and streets. They were persecuted and ostracized for believing in the Word of God Incarnate, and I have to believe they began to wonder if this gift of Christian faith was really worth all their pain.

There are hints of this situation scattered throughout the Letter to the Hebrews. The writer exhorts his readers to “hold fast to our confession” (4:14); to “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet” (12:12); and to “not refuse the one who is speaking” (12:25). One commentator describes this faith community as “second-generation believers (2:3-4), having been baptized (6:4-5; 10:22) and fully instructed (6:1-2). In fact, they had been believers long enough to have become teachers (5:12), but have been stunted in their growth . . . The readers are a faith community in crisis. Some members have grown lax in attendance at their assemblies (10:25), and (their) commitment is waning” (Fred Craddock, New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 12, Abingdon Press, Nashville, © 1998: 8-9). Even though the Letter to the Hebrews is one of the most ambiguous books of the Bible in terms

of who wrote it and its intended audience, it clearly speaks to Christians who are struggling with how to live faithfully with so much pressure around them to follow “other gods.”

In light of this anxiety and uncertainty, the writer of the letter reminds the readers of the “great cloud of witnesses” who have preceded them in faith. As we heard last week, earlier in chapter 11, the writer uses Abraham and Sarah as examples of faithfulness, even when their awaited promise was not necessarily for them to witness. Today, we enter into the midst of the writer’s listing of numerous saints of the Hebrew Scriptures who have been witnesses of God’s grace. It’s a “who’s who” of characters – even heroes – of the faith, who have followed the calling God placed in their hearts, and who remained faithful even in the midst of persecution and hardship.

The writer speaks of the Israelites fleeing through the Red Sea, of the walls of Jericho falling “by faith,” and even of the prostitute Rahab’s faithful action of welcoming the Israelite spies of Joshua. Beverly Gaventa comments that in verse 32, “instead of detailing the faithful deeds of individuals, the author lists them and refers more generally to their accomplishments. Initially, in verses 32-34, these are military or political deeds born of faithfulness: conquering of other nations, ruling with justice, triumphs in war. At verse 35, the subject changes. Instead of celebrating the triumphs of Israel, verses 35-38 recount the faithfulness of the martyrs during the Maccabean period . . . faithfulness consists not only of the triumphal behavior in battle and conquest but also of the faithful endurance of persecution” (Gaventa, Texts for Preaching, Year C, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 1994: 474-475).

And at the end of this listing of faithful saints is an intriguing closing statement: “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect” (39-40). In the first half of that quote, we are reminded that these faithful saints did not yet know what would happen, but they believed that God would provide. In the second half of that quote is the foretelling of God’s promise: “Even these heroes and heroines of Israel’s past did not attain the full victory for their faith, because ‘something better’ had been promised them. That ‘something’ now appears in the person of Jesus Christ” (ibid, 475).

What is powerful about this passage is the crescendo that builds throughout this listing of Israel’s heroes in faith. This crescendo moves through all of the Old Testament, until we reach the promise of God’s perfection: Jesus Christ. But you’ll notice it’s not just a bland statement about believing in God’s Son; it’s an active, realistic, inspiring description of what the journey of faith is all about: “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . . let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely” (12:1). The writer knows that

his readers' lives are not smooth and idyllic. They are running races that are full of ups and downs, and they are weighed down by all the stresses and temptations that seek to divert their path.

This journey is not easy; it is hard. But it is not impossible. That is why "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." That is why we are called to look "to Jesus (as) the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." He is the one who "endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). There is one and only one who is called to be the "perfecter of our faith." Our call to discipleship means we are to remember the presence of God throughout all of time and space, and how God's presence has led so many witnesses throughout that time. Sainly living doesn't require perfection; sainly living requires assurance, perseverance, and faith.

In two weeks, my parents will celebrate their 50th-wedding anniversary. In three weeks, over Labor Day Weekend, we will gather with family and friends in their home in Charleston, West Virginia, to celebrate this wonderful milestone in their lives. One of the things I've been doing is going through old photos to put together a slide show that we can share during a reception for them. And I have decided, after looking through all these photos, that I was a rather adorable baby. Don't believe me? Here, I'll show you (show a few pics). Remember, I'm an only child, so in the end, it's all about me!

What's been both heart-warming and heart-breaking, as well, is to see faces of the saints in our lives who are no longer with us. Pictures of grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles, saints from the churches we grew up in – these were the saints of our lives who taught us what love truly is, how faith can be a struggle, but also how faith is not a road we have to walk on our own. When we gather in three weeks to celebrate with my mom and dad, I will hold fast to the knowledge that I am and we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.

But the other thing that I have been reflecting on this week as it relates to this passage is how we are called to be saints to others. We don't like to use the word "saint" when we describe ourselves. But in many ways, how we care for others, lead others, and serve others in Christ's name is a form of sainly living.

Early in my life, I was the beneficiary of much sainly wisdom. I was on the receiving end of the mentor-mentee relationship, whether it was in ministry, in marriage, in parenthood, whatever. I realized how valuable that was to my formation as a child of God, and looked forward to future opportunities to "pay it forward."

And now, it feels as if that time has arrived. Whether it is seeking to guide difficult discussions with a board, or offering personal encouragement to a young pastor, or to offer counsel to a seminary

student, or to be a listening ear to a young believer – I’ve been placed in these opportunities for growth and deepening faith.

But I haven’t been in those relationships on my own. The cloud of witnesses has surrounded me with memories of challenging times in my past, and with the encouragement I received from God through these saints. While I am seeking to live faithfully today, I trust that it is with the formation I received from the saints in my past. And I pray I will influence in a saintly way those who will come after me.

We all have those saints who were crucial to our lives who are no longer with us. But just because those saints have died does not mean they are gone forever, for they are our great assurance in what lies ahead. When a member of the church is diagnosed with cancer, do you hear comfort from the cloud of witnesses, saying, “Have faith and know God will be with you?” When the church struggles with conflict, unrest, and discernment, do you hear the encouragement from the cloud of witnesses, saying, “Trust in the Lord, and God will show you the way?” When you are wrestling with life’s stresses, and you feel you can’t go on another day, do you hear the peace from the cloud of witnesses, saying, “Believe that God is here, and will never abandon you?”

God was there. God is here. God will always be with you. Trust in the one who is the perfecter of our faith. And believe that the cloud of witnesses surround us with God’s grace, now and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.