

“So Great a Cloud of Witnesses”
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-32, 12:1-2

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Today we celebrate “All Saints Day.” This is the day we remember those in this congregation who have died or those close to this congregation who have died. We acknowledge their lives and mourn their passing, and we give thanks for their influence on our lives and the example they gave us by the way they lived their lives. We all have departed dear ones whose memory we cherish and keep alive in our hearts. They have left an indelible mark on us and we can’t forget them. Today is a day for celebrating their lives and giving thanks to God for them.

I remember the first person in my life who died when I was a child. Her name was Dora. She was an immigrant from Romania and a cousin of my father with whom my father lived when he went to college. Dora was like a grandmother to me. She was so kind and warm. I visited her grave a few years ago. It’s hard to believe that she has now been dead for 55 years. One of my fond memories of her is that she read to me a little book written for children about the story of the little boy who went to hear Jesus speak. His mother had packed him a lunch of five barely loaves and two fish (John 6:9). This would be the lunch that Jesus would turn into a meal for 5,000 people. I relate this memory to you because it illustrates an important fact: we all came to Christian faith through the mediation of other people. Before I could ever read the Bible for myself, other people told me stories about Jesus or read to me stories about Jesus. Dora was one of these people. I was 7 years old when she died, and my grief was terrible. My parents tried to explain that Dora was now in heaven with Jesus, but I’m not sure how well I understood what they were trying to tell me. All I understood was that she was gone from my life. But what my parents were trying to explain to me I now understand: Dora is not really gone from my life.

And, indeed, she has often re-appeared in my dreams at night. How could someone I haven't seen for 55 years still have such an emotional tug on my heart? But she does. It's as if it were but yesterday that I last saw her. I hope I see her again after I die.

There are other examples of people in my life who made a significant impact upon me who have since died. About 6 or 7 of us went to the Listening Post last Sunday at Mesa Verde UMC, where we were asked to give an example of an important experience that we had had at church that shaped our faith. I mentioned a young minister I met at United Methodist Church summer camp in Wrightwood when I was 13 years. His name was Bert. Bert asked me if I had ever thought of becoming a minister. He obviously saw something in me that I had not seen, since I had never considered becoming a minister. He too is now dead. Yet his impact on my life was enormous. I probably wouldn't be standing in this pulpit today if it had not been for his formative influence on my life. I remember one particular sermon he preached around the campfire late at night under a million bright stars in the mountains of San Bernardino. It was based on John 21:15-17, where the risen Jesus asks Peter three times: "Peter, do you love me?" Each time Peter replies, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And each time Jesus commands Peter, saying, "Then feed my sheep." In that sermon I heard God calling me to the ministry. I mention this story because it illustrates that the call of God comes to us through other people. God speaks to us through the voices and words of other people. And the call of God doesn't have to be only to the professional ministry; whatever God has called you to do in your life, you heard God's call through the voice of other people who shaped you, nurtured you, encouraged you, mentored you. So, on this All Saints Day, I mention Dora and Bert as two persons who nurtured me in the Christian faith and gave me an example to follow about what it means to be a Christian and a human being. God reached out to me through Dora and Bert. Dora and Bert are

among those in my own cloud of witnesses, people who had a great impact upon my life and my Christian faith. There are many other examples I could mention. They are all now gone, yet their impact upon me remains. These illustrations indicate how utterly important is the example of other people upon who we become as persons and how we live our lives. I wouldn't be the person I am today had it not been for Dora and Bert, as well as many others.

That's how it was with the first disciples who knew Jesus personally. God's call to them came through their encounter with Jesus. God spoke to them through Jesus. When Jesus came upon Peter and his brother Andrew who were fishermen, Jesus said to them: "Come, follow me, and I will teach you how to fish for human beings and reel them in" (Matt. 4:19). It's no different now than it was in biblical times. Although we don't know Jesus as the first disciples did "according to the flesh," as the apostle Paul speaks of it (2 Cor. 5:16), every Christian we have ever met stands in the line of apostolic succession that goes back to those first disciples of Jesus who told other people about how life-transforming their encounter with Jesus had been. Just think about this: every Sunday School teacher you've ever had stands in a historic line of continuity with those first disciples and apostles who changed other people's lives by telling them the stories about Jesus. In my own case, whether it was Dora or Bert or any number of other influential people—from parents to ministers to camp counselors to Sunday School teachers to youth directors to seminary professors—all of them were standing in for Jesus' disciples and apostles by sharing with me the stories about Jesus and helping me to reflect on their significance for my life. I'm sure you know the hymn, "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus":

Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear; things I would ask him to tell me if he were here... Words full of kindness, deeds full of grace, stories of Jesus, tell them to me.

(United Methodist Hymnal #277).

The Letter to the Hebrews explains that the example of these forerunners in the faith gives us a reason to hang in there when the going gets rough. Life is compared to an athletic contest, a race: “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1). As with all athletic contests, we need “perseverance” or stamina to finish this race of life. Why? Because life is hard, and we need roadmaps, so to speak, if we are going to find our way through life. And if we intend to be Christians, there are even more difficulties and challenges in life to overcome since God expects us to live our lives as persons of a certain kind, namely, as persons like Jesus. The author to the Letter to the Hebrews says that we are to look to Jesus, who is described as “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). Jesus is said to have made a choice about what goals he would pursue in his life and to have accept the consequences for his choice: “for the sake of the joy that was set before him” he “endured the cross, disregarding its shame,” and now he “has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). The joy that is here spoken about refers to living his life not for worldly gain but for doing what is right in the eyes of God, regardless of the cost to himself. That’s why he can be said to be “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” since we too are called, as Christians, to imitate his example by living for God and not for ourselves, by living our lives with a heavenly goal in mind, not in order to seek a worldly gain for ourselves. Jesus’ earthly life ended in shame, as the world views things: but we are told that Jesus disregarded that shame, and “endured” the cross. In worldly terms, Jesus would hardly be the model for a successful worldly career that you’d want your children to follow. But that’s the point: as Christians, we are not trying to be successful in the world’s terms. We seek to be faithful to God, not successful in this world. We look for a different sort of “approval” than the world gives, namely, approval from God. This is what is spoken about when the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of “our ancestors [who] received approval”

from God “by faith” (Heb. 11:2). Their trust in God and their fidelity to God won God’s approval. And then it lists an entire array of persons from the Old Testament who lived by faith.

That’s why we need the examples of our saints, of those who truly loved God and who thus set the model for us to imitate in our lives. We depend on those who show us what it means to be a human being and a Christian by their own example of living. And while they may now be dead, they continue to exercise their influence on the persons we have become. The Apostles Creed affirms that “we believe in the communion of saints.” That is to say: the church does not consist solely of those who are still living on earth; rather, it also consists of all those who have gone on to live eternally in the presence of God. We still have communion with them, since they live with God and in us. These are not mere words; I’m speaking of a reality here. In this sense, the dead aren’t really dead; they are alive to God and to us. And when our time to die comes, we will join them and all the company of saints. Then we will be a part of this cloud of witnesses.

The flip side of our gratitude to those who have gone before us in life and faith is that we too are called to set an example for others to follow. As I was preparing for today’s service, I thought to myself: “I hope that when I die somebody is grateful that I lived because I made a beneficial impact on their life.” That is the most important thing we can do in this life. Just as others shaped us, so we can shape the lives of others. This is the most important legacy you can leave behind. Not money, not property, not even fame, but the impact of your life upon the lives of others. Of course, we know that the impact of one life upon another can be evil, not good. And, God forbid, that any of us is remembered as having been such a person! But that is why this is such an important lesson we are being reminded of today on All Saints Day. There is really only one important task in human life, that is, to become a good person who serves God and other human beings; and included in that task is that we help other human beings to find

their way in life meaningfully and constructively. You see, contrary to a typical assumption of American culture, there is no such thing as a “self-made man” (or woman). We are not isolated individuals who may then decide whether or not to relate to others. We do not live our lives in splendid isolation. We do not live our lives only for ourselves. No, we are social and interpersonal. What we do, who we become, what we say—all of this matters! And it not only matters here and now, but it matters forever. Our celebration of All Saints Day is a recognition of the fact that our lives matter beyond the present temporary moment. Our actions have reverberations throughout time and history and even into eternity. That’s why we speak of the judgment of God, since what we do, who we become, what we say and think matters to God.

So, take this occasion to ask yourself if there is someone you know who needs your help, your care, your counsel or advice, that is to say, your example of what it means to be a good person. Do you have a neighbor in need? Do you know a child or a teen ager or a young adult who needs your support? Do you know of an organization that needs your volunteer service? Whatever the particular answer to this question might be in your particular case, you can be assured that there is someone somewhere who needs you in their life right now. Find that person and be the example that will lead him or her to say of you after you have died, “I’m so glad I met Cyndi, or Bob, or Rebecca, or Darrell, or Bruce, because they lent me a hand or showed me the way or lifted me up or helped me to see that I’m an important person who matters.”

Before wrapping this up, let me mention one other person who was influential upon me. He was a youth minister at my church when I was in high school. His name was Tom. I remember that Tom helped those of us in the youth group to appreciate the elderly and especially the elderly in our own congregation. At Tom’s urging, one year we organized a special Thanksgiving dinner for the elderly members of our church on a different day than the

Thanksgiving holiday itself so that we could have the opportunity to cook for them and to dine with them. I'm grateful to Tom for the example he set us by teaching us to respect and care for the elderly. He once pointed out to me something else I've never forgotten. He explained that in the olden days, both in Europe and in America, the graveyard used to be the churchyard; that is, before modern societies started segregating cemeteries so that we wouldn't be constantly reminded of death, the graveyard used to be a regular feature of a church. People would walk to and from church through the graveyard; and this, he insisted, was a vivid reminder of what the creed affirms when it states, "We believe in the communion of saints." Ever since I learned that historical and theological lesson from him, I've been saddened that our churches and our graveyards are now separated from one another since I think this contributes to a lessening of our vivid awareness of our ongoing communion with the saints who have gone on before us.

Today, therefore, let us be grateful for those who have gone on before us, for their contributions to our lives, and for their eternal life in the presence of God. Let us also remember that one day we too will join their company in that great cloud of witnesses. For this reason, let us so live our lives that those who come after us will be grateful to have known us and to have been loved by us, since they will then bear witness that our example made all the difference to how they were able to live their lives as human beings and as Christians. And remember: there is no more important task we can accomplish in life than this, that we made a positive contribution to the life of some other person. Thanks be to God for so great a cloud of witnesses. May we be worthy to join their company. Amen.

RECITE: The Apostles' Creed (United Methodist Hymnal #882).