

For All the Saints
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
November 7, 2021
Hebrews 12:1–2

Today we turn to the book of Hebrews, a book that we do not often read in worship. It is found in the New Testament, grouped with the letters of Paul, but its authorship is a mystery. Scholars have attributed it to a number of Paul’s associates, Barnabas and Apollos, for example, even including, gasp, a woman, Priscilla.

It isn’t really a letter, either, but a sermon. It was probably written to an established congregation’s members who were discouraged that God’s promised kingdom wasn’t here yet and who had faced persecution. The book encourages people to remain faithful, to hang on, and not get discouraged and fall away from the body of Christ. Words we need, still, today.

We’ll be reading Hebrews 12: 1–2, which begins with the word, “Therefore” meaning that what is said hinges on prior content. So, we go back. Chapter 11 begins with the often-quoted verse, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The author then gives us a roll call of the faithful throughout the Bible. By faith, Abraham, Noah, Isaac, Sarah, Rahab, Moses, etc., did something for God, for the community, without necessarily seeing the future or the completion of the Kingdom of God. These are our spiritual ancestors.

The author continues in Hebrews 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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our 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.” AMEN

As I drove home from Bloomington on Thursday, the sky was an artist's delight. The setting sun was golden and low on the horizon. The sky was the kind of blue one sees in late fall, filled with clouds that were blue/grey on the bottom and peach colored on top. Rounding the corner of my exit, the sun's rays shone through those clouds, warming my heart, bringing a sense of peace, despite the fact that I was late for a meeting, and it felt like a physical manifestation of the great cloud of witnesses. Beautiful, shining, close enough to see, yet too far to really touch.

We need All Saints Day more than ever this year. A day to remember those who live eternally with God, to give thanks for the lives of the faithful in our congregation and in our lives whom we love. We need a day to feel our grief, and to be together to gain strength in our earthly walk with Jesus. The on-going season of Covid continues to make it difficult to gather for funerals, give hugs and eat together in a way that we need so desperately.

The author of Hebrews encourages us in the race that is life, reminding us that we are being cheered on by the saints that go before us. One day we, too, will join that great cloud of witnesses, but not yet. For now, ours is the journey here on earth, with all its delights, and wonders, its joys, sorrows and frustrations.

In the Gospel of John, (ch.16) Jesus promises that our grief will turn to joy, and that joy will be complete, someday, but not yet. So, until that time comes, how then, shall we live? How might we keep our spirits buoyant in a hostile, unpredictable world?

I simply offer a couple of thoughts:

First:

In faith, let us pray for the grace to show up for one another with tender and open hearts. To let kindness lead the way. In this time of deep political, ideological, and religious divides, our compassion and kindness to another person can bring hope. Knowing ourselves as God's beloved, made in the image of God, enables us to be kind to ourselves and to see the image of God in others, even those with whom we disagree. I know that we are all tired, and nerves are frayed. Keeping our hearts tender in a hard-hearted world is a challenge, but with the Holy Spirit and the support of community, it allows us to hold space for those who are hurting and builds our capacity for compassion and hope as we look forward to God's good future.

Next:

If we're lucky, this race will be long, the work of justice doing on-going, so to persevere, so in faith, let us take seriously God's call to sabbath. I learned this week about the nap ministry, founded by Tricia Hersey in 2016. It is an organization that explores the liberating power of naps. Rooted in Biblical teachings and liberation theology, the idea is that rest is a form of resistance against our capitalist culture and the tyranny of overwork and perfectionism. The nap ministry sees sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue. In a world that values things, and the production of things, more than it does human beings, rest is radical. God gave us Sabbath as holy practice of delight, fellowship, food, play,

and rest, and built it into the rhythm of creation. Even now, when lives are still hampered by Covid, people seem to be over-busy with non-stop activities. Stepping back, taking a rest and letting God be in charge for just a bit, can re-energize us for the work that Jesus places before us.

Finally, in faith, let's nurture gratitude as a grounding spiritual practice. Giving thanks opens the door to a glimmer of joy in a sea of despair. Saying thank you - to God, to the cashier at the grocery store, to your family and friend, is good for the soul and deepens relationships with self, God, others and the earth. Today, specifically, we give thanks for the lives of the saints upon whose shoulders we rest, those who helped make us who we are today. I want you to think of someone now who is dear to you...imagine their face, hear their voice. I'm going to give us just a few seconds to silently whisper our thanks to God for the life of that person. (*silence*)

In a few minutes we will share the Lord's Supper. I love that communion is a physical and mystical act. Eating at the table connects us not only with God and each another, but with the whole communion of saints here and in heaven. We share this meal with our church family past and present, some of whom ate bread and drank juice hundreds of years ago on or near this very ground. We eat with believers of all times and places, and the Spirit unites us. This is a feast of love and love never dies.

One day we will all join that glorious company of the saints in light, but not yet. For now, we will run the race, keeping our eyes upon Jesus as in faith, we pray for tender and open hearts, take rest to recharge and give thanks for those who now live eternally with God. AMEN