

“BUILDING ON THEIR GIFTS”

Hebrews 11:1 – 12:2

November 6, 2016 – ALL SAINTS’ SUNDAY

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Summer before last, driving through New England, we happened to pass through quite a few very small and obviously quite old towns. We noticed that almost every one had a cemetery – also old, and interesting-looking, shaded by stately ancient trees, and covering many acres. We got to joking that these towns seemed to have a whole lot more dead people than living ones.

Well, after we thought about it a bit, we realized that of course that’d be the case, especially in any community that’s been around for a couple hundred years or more. A lot of people have been here on this earth over the years – lived, loved, worked, raised families, died. Every community has a whole lot of backstory that isn’t evident at first glance. So I realized that we tend to have a bit of a skewed perspective. Most of the time, we see only our own little slice of history. We forget that these days we are living in are really just a moment in the larger sweep of time.

We do this in the church too. There is a lot of anxiety in the church these days. We are worried about budgets, about taking care of our building, about whether there will be enough people to be leaders. We wonder how we’ll minister to growing numbers of shut-ins and how we can get kids and parents to participate more. We feel overwhelmed at having to manage ever-changing communications technology. We feel uncertain about how to reach out to people who are already bombarded with too much information and too many options, and who are often kind of suspicious of Christians anyway. We know there are tremendous needs in the world and it seems we can never do enough to help. We aren’t sure we know yet how to be Christian in a religiously plural society.

We know too that the anxieties and tensions and divisions of the larger society are in church too... and we worry about what that might lead to. We see the world and the church changing – in ways we like, and ways we don’t like, and in ways we don’t understand – and some of that change seems to be happening rather rapidly.

We have a hard time seeing past all this so-very-present anxiety. It makes us forget, sometimes, that the church has been around a long, long time. Oh, we think, maybe, that we need to somehow get back to the way things used to be ... at some time in the past which we want to believe was in some way a better moment. But we know, really, that things never really go back to “the way they used to be,” and even if they did, in our heart of hearts, we also know every “golden age” had its darkness too. There has never been an era when it was easy to be faithful, when it was easy to follow Jesus, when it was easy to be the church.

But we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses whose faith and legacy urge us to see our lives – our church – our moment in time – in a bigger, divine perspective. They call us to choose faith over anxiety.

Very likely all the saints who came before us had their own moments of doubt, times when they thought their world or their faith was coming apart. But they didn't come apart. Maybe believers before us also indulged occasionally in their own nostalgia for earlier golden ages. But the only way to go was forward, and so they went forward, and the church survived. In every age, there were challenges. There has always been trouble and suffering, conflict and uncertainty and fear.

The Hebrews 11 account of faithful people from Israel's history names all kinds of struggles and hardships faced by the people of God. Early Christians – and later ones, too – faced persecution and marginalization. They had to figure out what it meant to be the “church” and how to relate to the world around them. They sacrificed to spread the gospel and build communities of faith. And it was never easy.

Through the centuries, the people of God always had reasons to be afraid. They faced obstacles and hostility and rejection. They had to work hard. They coped with limited resources. They took risks. They adapted to changing circumstances. Sometimes they had to reform themselves. They witnessed suffering and wondered why. Many times they feared their faith and their church might not survive. But they did survive.

Yes, they made a lot of mistakes: There were conflicts, even wars, over differences we can barely explain. There were inquisitions, schisms, forced conversions; there was prejudice and corruption. There was too much coziness with the wealthy and powerful, too little willingness to change.

But these Christians before us also envisioned communities of faith where none yet existed, created stunningly beautiful sacred spaces, built hospitals and schools, translated the Bible into dozens of languages, developed doctrines, wrote music and poetry in praise of God, handed on the faith, sat with the dying and buried the dead, fed the hungry, gave refuge to strangers, opposed slavery, marched for civil rights, and prayed – a lot.

They may not have had to use computers and projectors, navigate the internet or think about church security. They may not have had to figure out how to connect with busy 21st century families or respond to climate change. They may not have known, as we do, unlimited choices for how to spend leisure time or find community and meaning.

Their challenges were different than ours are. But God gave the gifts that those who came before us needed to face the challenges of their particular times.

And we are here because God gave those gifts and because our mothers and fathers in the faith claimed them and used them as best they were able. I'm talking about the believers of the distant and far distant past, and on down to those who shaped our Presbyterian heritage, and even to the saints of this congregation – our own cloud of witnesses - who believed in and shaped and supported and shared in the ministry of Westminster. I'm talking too about the saints in each one of our lives, men and women whose love and gifts nurtured each of us to faith and to recognition of our own gifts.

All these folks who came before us – and there were a lot of them - had different gifts – some of them not at all like the gifts we have.

We may not particularly need gifts that would help us endure persecution, fight for the right to read the Bible in our own language, develop systematic theologies, build churches in the wilderness, or cross oceans for religious freedom. We may not even need the same kinds of gifts it took to build and grow a church in Portage in the 1960's and '70's. But the cloud of witnesses reminds us that God's Spirit will supply the gifts we need to be the church in our moment in time. They call us to trust that Jesus will be with us, and show us the way, and sustain his church.

We honor the saints who came before us not by imitating their gifts but by using our own - and believing, as they did, that God can do amazing things with and among us. We honor them when we live with the same kind of faith they had, a faith bigger than the challenges and anxieties of the present moment. All Saints' Day challenges us to claim a faith that understands we are part of a much bigger community than the faces we see around us, and part of a much bigger story ... which is, ultimately, God's story.

Amen.