

## **“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”**

### **Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—<sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12Therefore, 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,<sup>2</sup>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.

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Jonathan Merritt, a well-known writer with the Religion News Service, wrote a wonderful article back in 2014, titled, *Why Protestants Need Some Saints of Our Own*. He said:

*The only thing I learned about saints growing up Baptist in the American South was that one-day they were going to “come marching in” and I apparently wanted “to*

*be in that number.” More than two decades later, I still don’t know what the heck that means.*

*Seriously, we Baptists were like most Protestants in that we didn’t think much about saints. I thumbed through a lost-and-found Bible once that added the title to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And I remember a Sunday School teacher commenting that saints were just a way Catholics engaged in idol worship. But that was pretty much it.<sup>1</sup>*

I suspect there are a lot of *Presbyterians* who might say the same thing!

In reality, however, Christians throughout history have interacted with saints in various ways. For example, Eastern Orthodox believers gaze at them through icons and pass down their stories via idealized biographies. Some Roman Catholics pray to them and ask for their help interceding with God. While such practices might make a good Protestant squirm, we can all benefit from viewing saints like Jacques Douillet, as *“those who march in front and give the example.”*

In fact, if you conduct even a cursory review of the saints you’ll stumble over scores of *misfits and outcasts*. They were not considered balanced or stable or completely sane by all in their respective communities. Instead, this throng of *oddballs* was *bold and countercultural and unashamed*. Saints embody what it means to follow Jesus when we are tempted to *play it safe* or *go with the flow* or *opt for acceptability over conviction and commitment and passion*.

Saints are, in the words of Episcopal writer Barbara Brown Taylor, *“eccentric, lopsidedly love-drunk people.”*

For instance, St. Christiana was a medieval woman who had a weak stomach and got nauseous at the smell of unpleasant *body odors*. She felt God called her to minister to low-class peasants who were known for *poor hygiene*. While caring for them, she’d often have to rush outside for fresh air to avoid vomiting.

St. Philip Neri, who claimed *a globe of fire* entered his mouth and caused his heart to swell at Pentecost in 1544. For the rest of his life, spiritual emotion caused him great heart *palpitations*. Philip was peculiar, he became known as *“God’s clown.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Merritt, *Why Protestants Need Some Saints of Our Own*, Religion News Service, November 4, 2014,

St. Basil, who enraged the religious aristocracy by throwing stones at the homes of rich people *who ignored the poor and bathing the feet of prostitutes*. He was called *yurodivi* or “*holy fool*.”

St. Francis gave away all of his possessions and walked barefoot, kissing lepers and caring for those in need. He chose to live a life of poverty and renounced his father’s inheritance. He would often reemerge from days of prayer and fasting so *disheveled that people would snicker and question his sanity*. He was known throughout Italy as Pazzo...or “*madman*.”

Modern-day Protestants often lionize those who’ve lived “*purpose-driven*” existences or have laid hold of their “*best life now*.” How unlike the saints of old. How divergent from those *nonconformists* who dreamed dreams and saw visions, who claimed to have heard Christ whisper in their ears.

The Apostle Paul once said “*Our dedication to Christ will make us look like fools*.” Spoken like a true saint.

Saints, you see, are people whose stories speak to us from *beneath and behind us* and say, “*It’s ok that you’re a little crazy*.” They are *reminders* that if you follow Jesus, in the words of Flannery O’Connor, “*you will know the truth and the truth will make you strange*.”

Protestants, I think, could benefit from a few more of those kinds of reminders.

Let’s think about these things in terms of our text from Hebrews this morning.

The author of *Hebrews* was writing to a small band of new Christians *who were suffering persecution and feeling isolated in their struggles*. In the great 11th chapter, he points to various people in *salvation history* who were able to face *every manner of challenge and hardship because they had faith*. The author says, in essence, “*You are not alone in this. Look to Abraham. Look to Moses. Look to David and Samuel and others so that you, too, might rise to the challenges that face you through faith*.”

Having such examples of faith can be both instructive and inspiring. It is through saints that we can see faithfulness embodied. We see what it looks like in a *human life*.<sup>2</sup>

But what is striking about this passage is the fact that *faith* seems strangely *ambiguous*. It may lead, on the one hand, to *amazing results*, such as the crossing of the Red Sea and the fall of Jericho, but it may point, on the other hand, simply to *courageous endurance of torture and persecution*. The reality of faith *cannot be decisively recognized by empirical observation*. It is *faith itself* that perceives the hand of God *in the rescue at the Red Sea or in the courageous endurance of martyrs*.

Which brings us to the example (or model) of Jesus himself: in this text Jesus is fully God and fully human, with the focus here primarily on his *humanity* and his experience of *enduring the cross for the sake of greater joy*, much like the situation facing the community of Hebrews.

In fact (and this important!) Jesus' suffering and death are presented *not as sacrifice for sin, but as his entering into solidarity with all persons who have endured shame, brutal suffering, and death*.

Jesus, therefore, can identify with the marginalized band of Christians; for that reason they should look to Jesus, *"the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."*

The writer *images* life as a *long-distance race*. Jesus is the one *who runs ahead, sets the pace, and neutralizes the distractions that entice the runners to wander off course*.

For the small community of Christians beset with shame and hostility, Jesus becomes a reminder that the *finite goods of the world*, however tempting, *cannot finally give life meaning*. *One must hold out for the ultimate promise*.<sup>3</sup>

And, of course, this all applies to us, as well. It is not easy being a Christian today. Defining oneself by one's beliefs and faith can be challenging socially. Friends may not understand. Relatives may look with concern. Colleagues may ask why we are

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<sup>2</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, *Protestant Sainthood*, The Christian Century, August 9, 2010

<sup>3</sup> John C. Shelley, Hebrews 11:29-12:2, *Feasting on the Word*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, pp. 352, 356

willing to give up some of the earthly goods for the sake of something or someone that is difficult to see or experience.

But what has helped God's people *deal with discouragement* since the beginning is the knowledge that *we are not alone*.

We follow in the footsteps of people from the earliest biblical times who were unsure of what the future held for them. We follow in the footsteps of saints who along the way chose to trust God *anyway*. We follow a God who does not abandon us in times of trouble. And when we follow the path of *staying focused on Jesus*, we are able to see the joy in life despite the suffering.<sup>4</sup>

The great contemporary theologian, Richard Rohr, puts it this way:

Saints see things in their *connectedness and wholeness*. They don't see things as separate. It's all one, and yet like the Trinity, it is also different. What you do to the other, you do to yourself; how you love yourself is how you love your neighbor; how you love God is how you love yourself; how you love yourself is how you love God. How you do anything is how you do everything.

Faith is not simply seeing things at their visible, surface level, but recognizing their deepest meaning. To be a person of faith means you see things—people, animals, plants, the earth—as inherently connected to God, connected to you, and therefore, most worthy of love and dignity. That's what Jesus (models for us): that you could see things in their unity, in their connectedness.

The less you can connect, the less *transformed* you are. If you can't connect with people of other religions, classes, or races, with your "enemies" or with those who are suffering, with people who are disabled, with LGBTQ folks, or with anyone who is not like you—well, to put it very bluntly, *you're not very converted*. You're still in the kindergarten of faith. We have a lot of Christians who are still in kindergarten, walking around the world with their *old politics and economics*. They have not allowed the Risen Christ to fully *transform* their lives. Truly transformed individuals are capable of a *universal recognition*. They see that everything is *one*.

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<sup>4</sup> David E. Gray, *Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Feasting on the Word*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010, p. 352

You have been invited—even now, even today, even this moment—to live in the *Communion of Saints*, in the Presence, in the Body, in the Life of the eternal and eternally Risen Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Friends, we Protestants need more saints. The Roman Catholics have more than 10,000 canonized saints. By my count, we Protestants have as few as five — *Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Their names are invoked with *numbing regularity*, whenever the preacher needs an illustration of faithfulness. Of course these individuals are great examples of faith. They are saints, to be sure.

But when their names are invoked *so often*, and other examples drawn upon *so seldom*, it does not stretch the imagination but rather constricts it. Let's give these saints at least a rest and recognize some others, so that the gospel in all of its dimensions can be heard more fully again.<sup>6</sup>

“Saint,” of course, in the Pauline sense, is a term that includes *all of the people of God*. But I think we need *more saints*, those particular individuals of faith about whom the church says, “*Pay attention to these lives. Take inspiration from them. Try, as you are able, to follow their example.*”

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Communion of Saints*, Center for Action and Contemplation, December 14, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Copenhaver, *Protestant Saints*

