

Pioneers of Faith

Hebrews 12:1-3

All Saints Sunday

11 01 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

The **Cumberland Mountains** form the southeastern section of the Appalachians. They straddle western Virginia and middle Tennessee. In the 18th century, the range created a natural barrier to western expansion in the American colonies.

In 1775, **Daniel Boone** was commissioned to blaze a trail through the mountains. The pioneer followed an ancient Native American trail called *The Wilderness Road* through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. Boone used an ax to mark the trees along the way. Hundreds of thousands of frontiersmen eventually followed in his footsteps, settling in the rich lands of the Kentucky River area.

I. All Saints Sunday

Today is *All Saints Sunday* in the Christian calendar. Some here grew up with this tradition while others may be unfamiliar with the observance. It is an ancient Christian festival that the United Methodist Church has reclaimed in recent years.

Oftentimes, we associate the word “**saint**” with the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. However, the New Testament word translated as “*saints*” literally means “*holy ones*” or those set apart for God’s service. Based upon the Biblical definition, ALL Christians are also saints.

All Saints Sunday serves as the church’s **Memorial Day**. It is a time when we honor God’s saints who have gone from the church militant to the church triumphant. We especially remember our church members who have died during the past year.

All Saints Day is on November 1, and the church typically observes the festival on the first Sunday of November. This year the dates are one and the same. (This is also the reason that October 31 is called *Halloween* or *Hallowed Eve*. It is the hallowed or holy evening before *All Saints Sunday*.)

At **Sam Jones**, our tradition is to read the names of those who have died during the past year. We toll a bell and light a candle in remembrance of their lives. Family and friends stand in honor of those we have loved. And we realize that some day in the unforeseeable future our names will be called in a similar service.

Over the years, *All Saints* has become increasingly significant to me. The solemn sacredness of the day touches a place deep within my soul. Like most here, I recall loved ones who now populate that “*great cloud of witnesses*.” Today of all days we come to affirm our faith in “*the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting*.”

II. Pioneers of Faith: Others

In part, we honor God's saints because of what they have meant in our lives. At their best, they served as our **pioneers of faith**. They blazed a trail for others to follow. Their words and deeds set an example for our lives; and we continue to experience their influence.

A prayer in *A Service of Committal* in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* expresses this sentiment in a powerful way: *"For all that they have given us to make us what we are, for that of their lives which lives and grows in each of us, and for their lives that in your love will never end, we give you thanks."*

We know the importance of **role models** for children and teenagers. Young people are encouraged to choose their mentors wisely. If we are going to follow in someone's footsteps, then we need to be sure they are going in the right direction. Once you get stuck in a rut, it is difficult to get out.

Perhaps you recall studying about the **Oregon Trail** in history. Some of our school age children may have played a computer game by the same title. During the 19th century, the trail originated at the Missouri River and ended in the Oregon territory. The 2,000 mile journey crossed half of the North American continent, taking anywhere from four to six months to complete. Countless settlers followed the trail during the height of America's western expansion.

People traveling in wagons were warned to pick their path carefully. In some places, the ruts from previous travelers were so deep that the wagon wheels were forced to follow. Today you can still travel out west and see the deep grooves worn into the rock by pioneers two centuries ago.

However, the need for role models does not end with adolescence. We all need persons who model for us what it means to be a Christian in an often times challenging world. They serve as our pioneers, blazing a trail into the unknown wilderness ahead.

Over the years, there have been people whom I have admired and emulated. But as I grow older, I have found that mentors are becoming MORE important to me rather than less. I deliberately look for older Christians who can serve as role models in the various ages and stages of life. I want to know what it means to live a faithful life in your 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. These pioneers of faith blaze a trail that shows me how to live—and die—as a man of God.

In a recent men's Bible study, we were asked to list the name of someone who had deeply impacted our lives. Then we divided into groups of three to share the results. Every person in my small group had written down the same name: Ted Langford.

The Reverend **Ted Langford** was a retired Methodist minister in our congregation. After seminary, Ted became a bi-vocational minister. He served as a pastor in the local church but also worked for the state of Georgia as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. He worked with physically impaired clients, including those who were blind and deaf.

Over the years here at Sam Jones, I have been blessed by Ted's friendship, love, support, and example. He showed me see how to serve faithfully as a servant of God in a stage of life I have yet to reach.

And you have had similar experiences with others. During the roll call of the faithful this morning, we called the names of some people who have served that role in each our lives. Those who stood during the roll call of the honored dead could share stories about each saint's life.

III. Pioneers of Faith: Us

Each person here has received a spiritual **legacy** from other Christians. This inheritance from the past has molded and shaped us into the people we are today. We pause to give thanks for the lives of God's saints.

And now it is our turn. The baton has been placed in our hands. We are challenged to pass on the faith to others. We not only RECEIVE but also BEQUEATH a legacy. We are the faith pioneers for those following in our footsteps and learning from our example. For better or worse, each of us is leaving a legacy.

The *Geico* insurance company is presently running a series of commercials that features a bundle of money with eyes. The tagline of each ad is "*That's the money you could be saving.*" Playing in the background is Rockwell's 1984 song, *I Always Feel Like Somebody's Watching Me*. There IS!

Somebody is always watching you and me. Whether you signed up for it or not, people learn from our example. The people around us are affected by the words we say, the deeds we do, and the faith we exemplify. It is both a frightening responsibility and tremendous privilege to serve as role models for others.

This reality was recently reinforced in my own life. During a Wednesday night supper, a couple asked if I had spoken to their young son earlier in the night. I told them I had and then asked why. They said, "Well, we got back to the table and Riley said that he had been talking to JESUS!"

My first reaction was: "Oh, my God!" And I promise you that was not an exclamation but a deep-seated prayer. There is a young child in our congregation who thinks I am Jesus. Most of the rest of you are very aware that I am NOT!

I am both deeply honored and greatly terrified. Riley's immature image of Jesus is being shaped by my example. To echo the words of the congregational response at an infant baptism, I have the privilege and responsibility of ordering my life after the example of Christ so that this child, surrounded by steadfast love, may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened in the way that leads to life eternal.

We are called to exemplify Christ for anyone who is watching us: parents with children, children with parents, spouse with spouse, sibling with sibling, friend with friend. We serve this role for those around us. Paul could write to the Corinthian church: "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*" (1 Cor. 11:1) God grant us the grace to be able to make the same bold statement.

THEREFORE, since we are surrounded by a crowd of witnesses, Hebrews 12 urges: "*Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" (Hebrews 12:1)

The passage portrays an athlete stripping down for a race. Anything that might hinder or entangle is cast aside. We run not for an earthly trophy but a heavenly prize; and others are watching our progress. We are challenged to give up any sin that might trip us . . . or trip others. After all, someone is always watching us.

IV. We Do Not Run Alone

We are called to run the Christian race with perseverance, our eyes firmly fixed upon Jesus Christ. However, always remember that we do not run alone. Hebrews 12:1 begins with the reminder: “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such **a great cloud of witnesses** . . .*” There are people in the stadium cheering each step and encouraging us along the course marked out before us.

Carlyle Marney was a Southern Baptist minister from Charlotte, North Carolina. In a famous lecture, he compared a person’s life to a house. There are various rooms that represent different aspects of who we are. He went on to say that each house also has a balcony outside. Standing on the balcony are those persons from our past who have been positive, spiritual influences. They are our **balcony people**. Marney then said: “*Walk outside and look up and see who’s up there looking down at you. Wave to them. They are your saints.*”

Even if they are no longer alive, their voices continue to whisper in our ears and echo in our hearts. They speak to us words of affirmation, encouragement, consolation, and comfort. They assure us of our worth and value. They say, “I love you” and “I believe in you.” They call us to be more than what we are.

I invite you to take a moment and imagine the people standing on the balcony of your life. See one face, call one name. Do you have someone in mind? Now take a few moments to turn to someone beside you and share a balcony person in your life.

Certainly there are saints who serve as our balcony people. But first and last, we also run the race with **God** by our side. The Holy Spirit paces our steps, granting us grace that is sufficient for every need. Even when we trip and fall or wander off the track, our Lord is beside us still, encouraging us onward. We are called to fix our eyes on Jesus—the author and pioneer of our faith.

Some here will recall an incident in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. **Derek Redmond** had set the British record for the 400 meter sprint; and he was the heavy favorite in the ’92 Olympics. During the semi-final race, however, disaster struck.

On the back stretch of the track, Redmond suddenly fell to his knees. In midstride, his right hamstring snapped. The runner collapsed in agony; but he stubbornly refused to quit. Derek crawled to his feet and began painfully hopping around the track.

Suddenly a man jumped out of the stands and joined Derek on the track. It was his father, Jim Redmond. Waving away the Olympic officials and security guards, the father placed an arm around his son. Together the two slowly made their way around the last turn and across the finish line. The entire stadium spontaneously stood in an ovation to such courage and determination.

We are sons and daughters of the living God who loves us beyond all human imagination. In the moments when it seems like we cannot go on, our heavenly Father lifts us to our feet and carries us by his strength. To paraphrase the words of the prophet Isaiah, sometimes we mount up with wings like eagles. Other times we run and do not falter. But sometimes God's grace enables us to walk and not faint.

Conclusion

On **All Saints Sunday**, we recall God's beloved who have gone from the church militant to the church triumphant. They have fought the good fight, run the good race, and kept the faith. God's crown of righteousness awaits each of them. They are our **pioneers of faith**, blazing a trail into the future. We follow in the footsteps of those who have responded to Christ's call: "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

But never forget that we are God's saints, too. We serve as pioneers of faith for those who follow behind us. Hear once again the words of Hebrews 12:

"THEREFORE, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith"