

A Time for Thanksgiving Series
Looking Through the “Cloud”
Sermon on Hebrews 11:1-13, 39-12:2 (10/31 & 11/1/15)
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This weekend marks one of my favorite weekends of the year – and, while I admit I find Halloween to be quite fun, I do not specifically mean Halloween weekend. This weekend is a favorite weekend of mine every year because it's the weekend when we in the church celebrate All Saints Day.

In reality, it's no coincidence we celebrate All Saints the same time we celebrate Halloween because “Halloween” is short for “All Hallows' Evening” – or, really, the evening before All Saints Day. If you want to be *really* official, the celebration is meant to last for three days: October 31, Halloween...November 1, All Saints Day...and November 2, All Souls Day.

Each of these days is meant to have a distinctive focus, but, overall, it's to be a time of giving thanks for the faithful departed.

In some branches of the Christian family tree, All Saints is a time to recognize and give thanks for “official” saints of the Church. Here in The United Methodist Church, however, we don't really have “official” saints – other than perhaps writers of Christian Scripture like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul.

While we do not really have “official” saints to recognize in our particular part of the Christian family tree, we do, of course, have our own dear ones who have died – those who have gone on into God's eternity, and for whom we give thanks as we celebrate All Saints.

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Actually, that's what nearly all of November will be *about* here at McCabe United Methodist Church: giving thanks. As we move toward our national celebration of Thanksgiving, the weekends surrounding four out of November's five Sundays will focus on giving thanks to God for so many gifts in this life and in our world.

Next weekend, we will hear a thanksgiving message from guests Mike and Libby Flowers who lead our United Methodist outreach ministries on the Spirit Lake Reservation. On November 14 and 15, we'll spend our worship services giving thanks to God for our land and country. And, then, on November 21 and 22, we'll give thanks to God for the gift of music. But, first, this weekend we give thanks to God for the *saints*.

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The English word “saint” is derived from the Latin word “sanctus,” meaning “holy.” “Hallow” is an old English word for “holy,” which is why *Halloween* is defined as the

eve before All Saints Day. Halloween is the eve before we celebrate departed saints – departed *holy* ones. But, if you look up the word “saint,” you'll find many definitions...

According to dictionary.com, a “saint” is a “person of exceptional holiness in life, formally recognized as such by the Christian church.” Or, a “saint” is a “person of great virtue or benevolence.” Or, a “saint” is “a person who has died and gone to heaven.”

My favorite definition is a quote by the late American journalist, Ambrose Bierce who wrote, a “saint is a dead sinner, revised and edited.”¹ *A dead sinner, revised and edited...* I love it.

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Several years ago, one of my college religion professors – Dr. Richard Swanson – wrote something about All Saints Day that I absolutely love, and I'd like to read it to you now. It's a bit lengthy, but worth hearing. Dr. Swanson wrote this:

“All Saints’ Day is a day set aside in the church’s...year to reflect on the members of our communities who have died. Some of these people are officially recognized saints. Some of these people are saints in the sense that all [baptized people]...are saints and signs of [Christ’s] resurrection. [And some] of these people are people... whom we could never imagine our lives [without].

“This day celebrates the link between the everyday world ... and the larger world held in God’s (and our) memory.”

He then goes on to say, “I was raised to think of All Saints’ Day as the day when we remind each other that the bleachers [of our lives] are full of old dead saints cheering for us as we try to live a life that honors life and witnesses to [Christ’s] resurrection.

“On this day I open my ears to hear the encouragement offered by my sister, and my grandmothers, and the relatives who have cheered for my family from forever. Their voices join together with the ‘official’ saints that everyone knows are cheering for us all...

“On All Saints’ Day, I hear my old grandmother saying, ‘That’s good. You see, he did good. I knew he could do good.’ At that point, my other grandmother (the teacher) says, ‘You mean he did *well*.’ ‘No,’ says my grandmother, ‘I mean it was a good thing he did.’”

He finished this section by saying, “I’ll take it either way. Cheering is cheering.”²

¹ Definitions found at www.dictionary.com.

² Swanson, Richard W. *Provoking the Gospel of Luke*. 224-225.

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The saints of our lives and our world are, indeed, a constant and eternal fan club. They are not divine. They do not perform miracles on our behalf. They are not more holy than we could ever aspire to be. But they are there. And that matters.

Our saints are not like those in our lives on earth who sometimes grumble at us or complain about us or gossip about us. They do not get jealous when we do well and they do not judge us when we fall. Our saints are a crowd of another variety.

They are the “large crowd of witnesses” from Hebrews 11 and 12: our saints are those who have already run the race of this life before us. They ran the race and have gone on in glory to watch us as we run it.

Our saints are the ones who know from experience what works and what fails in this life. They are those who understand what it means to have made mistakes on this earth...and who know that, even though they, too, were sinners, God welcomed them into an eternity of love and grace.

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Hebrews chapter 11 and the first few verses of chapter 12 is arguably the most famous section of saints-related Scripture in the Bible. As you heard read a bit ago, in Hebrews 11, the writer outlines various “heroes” of faith – heroes whose lives somehow exemplified faithfulness to God... heroes we are meant to look to as examples on our own journey of faith.

The faith heroes we heard about were Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah...but the remainder of Hebrews 11 also tells a piece of the stories of Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. The writer also mentions the Old Testament judges and leaders Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and the prophets.

All of those names are lifted up in Hebrews 11 as members of the “large crowd of witnesses” mentioned at the beginning of Hebrews 12.

This “large crowd of witnesses” is referred to in other translations of the Bible as a *cloud* of witnesses – and I love that. So often we think of God's eternity as being above us...beyond the clouds. It makes sense, then, to think of saints as a *cloud* of witnesses.

Whether crowd or cloud, however, they *are* like those in God's eternal bleachers: cheering us on as we run the race of this life.

The biblical witnesses referred to in Hebrews 11 were faithful in the midst of challenging circumstances, so they are meant to bring us hope as we run our own

race of faith in this life. Yet the writer of Hebrews reminds us not to fix our gaze on the crowd – or the *cloud* – itself.

Our saints are meant to help turn our gaze to the Holy One on whom it truly belongs: we are meant to look beyond the cloud of faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ himself. For Jesus is the one who perfected faith in this life. He is our ultimate faithful example. He is the one who best deserves our gaze – who best deserves our faithful focus. The saints in our lives help turn our gaze to him.

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If you were here at McCabe on and after All Saints Day last year, you may recall that we created something of a literal “cloud of witnesses” in the clerestory area outside of the sanctuary.

We created this “cloud” using remembrance slips similar to those we have available for you today.

I'd invite you now to find one of those slips...and, when you find one, write down the names of your own saints – names of those who, in their own way in their lifetime, helped turn your gaze to Jesus...those who helped you run the race of this life with faithfulness, integrity, and joy... those who have gone on into God's eternity and who are now in your blessed bleachers.

When you come forward for Communion in a bit, you will bring your remembrance slip with you and drop it into the basket near the front.

Then, as we did last year, all the remembrance slips we gather during our worship services this weekend will be strung along fishing line under the ceiling-level windows in our clerestory. So, when you look up, you will note that these remembrance slips – and the names we will write on them – will be for us a great cloud of witnesses.

In the coming weeks, when you see that cloud of witnesses, I certainly hope you will give thanks for those saints. More importantly, however, I hope you will look *through* the cloud and toward heaven where Jesus Christ reigns in eternal glory.

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On my remembrance slip, I will be writing the name of my Grandma Hazel Wheeldon who died in Sioux Falls on December 28 of 2014.

She and my grandfather spent about 17 years in Bismarck, raising their kids, and McCabe was their church home. My grandfather died in 1993 and I know that, somewhere in God's wide eternity, they are both gracing a set of heavenly bleachers, cheering us on as we worship God in this church they loved so much.

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My Grandma Hazel had some significant dementia at the time of her death. In her last months on earth, she struggled to engage in conversation and it was often difficult to understand what she *did* try to say. But, somehow, she could still sing along to “Jesus Loves Me.”

In fact, she would ask us to sing it...over and over again. It was almost like, as she grew closer to death, she was doing her best to fix her gaze on Jesus and to dwell in the assurance of his love for her.

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I am so thankful to have gotten to share so much of this life with my grandmother – and I trust that many of you have dear ones who are on your mind and heart today as we celebrate All Saints. If you haven't yet, please write their names on one of those remembrance slips.

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Our saints have run this race before us, and they're all out there somewhere... praying for us when we fall and cheering for us when, by God's grace, we get up and continue on. These saints were gifts given to us, to help us through this life: to encourage us, to cheer for us, to challenge us...to bless us.

So today we remember our saints. Today we thank God for them.

But, most importantly, on this celebration of All Saints, we must look *through* our cloud of faithful witnesses...we must look through them and we must fix our gaze on Jesus. He is our ultimate, most faithful example – and the assurance of his love for us is the best, most eternal good news we could ever hope for. Thanks be to God.

And now we will fix our gaze on Jesus as we begin our celebration of Holy Communion...