

Hebrews 6:9-12

"The Legacy of Saints"

People who don't know our family very well are constantly confusing our daughter and our daughter-in-law. They are both petite, beautiful women with long brown hair. They are both Greenville County Elementary School teachers who teach at schools that are in pretty rough neighborhoods and make up for their size with their feisty attitudes. They both grew up at the same church and to top it all off, they both are named Katie!

When our daughter was growing up, she was a real challenge when it came to church basketball. At barely five feet one inch tall her opponents always underestimated her. Truth be told she had at least one technical foul a season and fouled out of about half of the games. In her junior year in high school, my husband Danny started coaching the team to try to keep her under control. Well, let me tell you how THAT worked out.

I will never forget one particular game when we were in an old church gym with poor lighting and all the stands on one side. There was a girl on the opposing team who was at least 5'10" who set her sights on Katie early. I was watching Katie's face and saw it coming. Finally she had had enough. Katie literally plowed into her opponent, knocking her off her feet, and that tall girl went flying in the air. The referee immediately blew his whistle, made the foul sign, and then just stopped. He knew in his mind that to call a charge was just not sufficient so he looked at the crowd with a rather confusing face and then called out "Body slam?"

I thought of this game when I studied the passage that we just heard. You see, when preparing a sermon, it is always best to read the verses surrounding the passage. The writer of Hebrews is unknown and most scholars refer to him simply as The Preacher. And in the verses

leading up to this one, The Preacher delivers the harshest message of the whole letter. He basically tells the Jewish Christians that he is writing to, that in the age of religious persecution in which they are living, that anyone who saves his own life by denying Christ is delivering a "body blow" to the church.

What a hard message to hear. Can any of us imagine living in a climate where publicly standing up for our faith in Christ Jesus could mean death? But the preacher is clear – not only will you endanger your own salvation but could indeed impact the ministry of the entire body of Christ. What a burden to bear.

However, following this harsh message, the writer of Hebrews calls the listeners "beloved". It is the only time this word is used in the entire letter and I believe it is his way of saying that if he didn't love the new church so much, he would not have spoken with such severity.

That is what saints do. They speak the truth in love. Saints do not sugar coat or fluff up our egos if it is not a good thing for the whole church. A saint is invested in the entire "Communion of Saints" – the whole body of Christ - and will say and do what is necessary to keep the Gospel message of the cross alive.

This past Wednesday was All Saints' Day, a time to honor those saints who have gone to the church triumphant this year. However, we are also right in the middle of our official Stewardship Season, a time when we consider our commitments to the Lord with regards to the many gifts God has given us as individuals, as families and as a church family. As I prayed about in which direction I should lean for the message this week, the Holy Spirit sent a part of the Word that addresses both. You see, the Preacher in Hebrews talks about the legacy that our saints leave us in the church and how we are to care for that legacy.

First, let's talk about what a saint is. Most of us use the word saint to describe someone who is holy or set apart because of his or her dedication to the Lord. It is a person who is closely bound to God because of their covenant love with the Heavenly Father. Some traditions believe that you cannot qualify for sainthood until you have died. But the Apostle Paul always used the word in a broader sense and I like to follow his example.

Frederick Buechner says in his book Wishful Thinking that "the feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and their sainthood consist less of what *they* have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them." (emphasis mine) Given these thoughts, we are all saints.

So let's look at some Nazareth Saints. When I initially wrote this sermon, there were two from this past year that we might call saints. Ron Tesh and Harold Kinley. Ron was a long time member and Elder who served the church in many ways. I will always remember him for calling me on the carpet, in a very faithful and loving way, when we had not started collecting funds after the flooding in Louisiana. Every time we take up an offering for victims of a natural disasters, I think of Ron's dedication to helping others.

Harold was not a member long but participated faithfully as long as his health would allow. He appreciated the attentiveness that this church family gave to him and his wife, as they both suffered from cancer and died almost a year apart to the day. They will be among the Saints of Nazareth because God used them in ways that helped each of us and all of us grow in our faith and service.

And I think we all know that, last Friday evening God called our beloved John Ritzo to join those saints in the Church Triumphant. We will celebrate John's life and resurrection later this week but I know that as Debbie and the entire church family mourns his passing, we are

thankful for his faith that was such an important part of this congregation and confident in God's perfect wisdom.

There are saints from the past who I only know by name but wish I had known personally. Clara Edge, Miller and Jo Foster, Don Deere, Enoch Dyal and Glenn Mason, to name a few. And each of you *even now* can recall the people in your personal faith journey whom you consider saints, whether they were members of this particular fellowship or not.

The writer of Hebrews reminds the congregation that hears his words that our past saints are important because they help us remember that we are not walking on paths that have been untrodden. We are walking in the footsteps of those who labored, who suffered, who received and gave joy, who grew in love and faithfulness so that we could follow their example.

And because of this, the Preacher calls us to be imitators of the saints that we admire in two venues. We are to imitate their faith and we are to imitate their patience. When we are called to imitate the faith of the saints, we are reminded that in the body of Christ we are responsible for each other. Because we are one family, we are to pay special attention to one another's spiritual, emotional, mental and physical needs. Especially the vulnerable – the young, the old, those with special needs, those who are hurting or grieving or lost.

And of course, when we love and serve one another, we are loved and served in return. This is how the legacy of Saints works best! Sometimes, when we are walking through trials as a church, recalling the diligence of the saints who went before us helps us focus on the promise of God's ongoing justice. When we look at our saints, we have the courage to imitate their faith because we know that, just as God in Christ guided them to grow amid successes AND failures, so God will do the same for us.

We can also grow as a faith community when we imitate the patience of our saints. All churches go through cycles of growth and decrease, of enthusiasm and apathy, of financial commitment and irresponsibility. Yet the writer of Hebrews says, "we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish". This is to help us remember that, even if our saints of the past had temporarily fallen away, they have never given up their practical service to fellow Christians and neither should we.

Which leads us to consider the saints of today. Now I would not be foolish enough to name individual saints like Barbara Melton or Chuck Holmes or Lois Weneck or Lenny Senn who are always working, praying, and supporting this body of Christ in ways that are seen and unseen. If I did that, I would have to go through the whole roster and sight each gift that each saint here contributes to the body of Christ at Nazareth and then we would NEVER beat the Baptist to lunch!

But suffice it to say that the legacy of the saints who went before us is being preserved each day by the faith and patience of many in this sanctuary. So instead, I would like to talk about how to perpetuate this legacy. And that is through our giving – plain and simple. The first and best way we can all give is to remain faithful in our prayers. And in reality, there are some that may be in the season of their lives when that is all that they can give. What a gift!

When I received the call to be the Chaplain at the Presbyterian Community, it was only two years old and had about 70 residents. I was the first Chaplain that they had ever had and frankly didn't know what I was doing but it worked out well because they didn't have any expectations either. I decided to start by going room to room and just getting to know each person that lived there.

I will never forget one of the first saints I encountered. Ruth Swindler was 98 years old, four foot 10 on a good day and sharp as a tack. As we got to know each other she said, "I don't have the energy that I used to and you may not see me come to as many things as I would like, but I promise you that I will pray for you by name every day." And friends, I can tell you that there were some days that were so grief-filled or difficult or confusing when the sure and certain knowledge that one precious saint named Ruth was praying for me is all that got me through.

But many of us are in a different season of our lives now and can give financially. And in order to preserve the heritage from the saints that have served God in this place since 1772, we are called to give what we can, when we can. We are called to give joyfully, sacrificially and with hope that the legacy that has been given to us will continue to be a legacy to others.

And just as importantly, we are called to give of our time and our talents. Our Book of Order makes it clear that the Session, our governing body, is responsible for the operations of this church. But fifteen people cannot possibly pray about, plan, and implement every aspect of worship, teaching, service, mission, fellowship, nurture and upkeep that this church requires. Nor should they. It will take every one of us searching our hearts with the help of the Spirit to know how God is calling us to share the message of the salvation through Jesus Christ.

Because there is one more category of saints that I have not spoken of. The saints of the future. I have been here less than two years and I can already see the gifts that are flourishing in our future saints. The gifts of mission that are growing in Kathryn Kotecha; the gift of participating in worship that is evident in Jacob Schneider; the gift of encouragement that Emma LaBelle shares with the precious notes that she gives me after church. These are gifts of the Spirit, which I am sure have been modeled by their parents, but can only become a legacy if *we*

continue to teach them by our words, our deeds and yes, our money that they are important parts of the body of Christ at Nazareth and in the world.

So friends, as you consider prayerfully your personal responsibility to be imitators of the faith and patience of our saints, remember that it is a legacy that is not finished! I came across a prayer written by Sir Francis Drake in the 1500's that so beautifully sums up this passage that I have taken the liberty of updating his language to speak to us today. Listen to his thoughts.

O Lord, when you give us important work to do, help us know that it is not the beginning, but a continuance of the work that has already been done, until our work is finished. This work will then glorify you.

Each of us are asked to do great works for God. While the beginning is important, carrying on is VITAL so that we can reach the end. May the Legacy of Saints in this place and in God's earthy Kingdom continue to grow by our commitments until all God's saints are gathered around the Heavenly Table in the Kingdom that is to come. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
Nazareth Presbyterian Church, November 5, 2017

Living God, in whom there is no shadow or change,
we thank you for the gift of life eternal, and for all those who, having served you
well, now rest from their labors. We thank you for all the saints remembered and
forgotten, for those dear souls most precious to us. Today we give thanks for those
who during the last twelve months have died and entered into glory.

(Ron Tesh, Harold Kinley and John Ritzo)

We bless you for their life and love, and rejoice for them “all is well, and all
manner of things will be well.”

Jesus our Redeemer, mindful of all those choice souls who have gone on ahead of
us, teach us, and each twenty-first century disciple of every race and place,
to follow their example to the best of our ability:

- to feed the poor in body or spirit,
- to support and comfort the mourners and the repentant,
- to encourage the meek and stand with them in crises,
- to affirm those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
- to cherish and learn from the merciful,
- to be humbled by, and stand with, the peacemakers.

Let us clearly recognize what it means to be called the children of God,
and to know we are to be your saints neither by our own inclination nor
in our own strength but simply by the call and the healing holiness of Christ Jesus
our Savior. Amen