

Message for All Saints Sunday, October 29, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Hebrews 12:1-2

Surrounded by the cloud

As a society, we really get into Halloween. We love to surround ourselves with creepy, scary things. There are ghosts and spirits floating in the air around us. Those who have died are out to get us. Get ready to jump and to scream!

Though we seem to like this scary version of the afterlife, it's not very biblical. The short scripture passage we read this morning gives us a completely different image: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." We are surrounded, yes, but not by ghosts and goblins, not by malevolent spirits out to get us. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, those who have been faithful, those whom we have loved and who have loved us, those who still guide us and show us the way.

Instead of being scary, this is a strong and comforting image, sort of the anti-Halloween. We are not alone in our walk of faith. Not only do we have the Holy Spirit, which is the constant presence of God with us, not only are we in fellowship with others in our faith communities, large and small, but we are also surrounded, held up, bolstered and guided by all those who have gone before us on the way. The very air around us is filled with folks cheering us on, praying for us and encouraging us. Because of them we are able to move forward. "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."

Several years ago we were privileged to have Dr. Lynn Huber speak here at

Glennon Heights. Some of us bought a copy of her book, Revelations on the Road: A Pilgrim journey. In the last chapter of that book Lynn writes about the necessity of interdependence. She says, “There is a terrible tension [in our world] between freedom and social control. You either live in a world in which you have a supportive network that both sustains you and puts some controls on your behavior, or you have the freedom to live, and die, alone. This is not an absolute choice,” she says, “no one is entirely alone. But that tension exists.”

She explains the dark side of this tension. “I believe that our nation has moved too far in the direction of independence. The price for all of us is intolerable. Families are trapped into thinking they have to do everything alone because they are independent, and they end up shredded by individual responsibilities that as a species we are probably made to share in community: feeding, clothing, educating, healing and entertaining ourselves and our children. People suffer terribly from the terror of somehow not measuring up and thereby becoming one of ‘those people who need help.’”

What Lynn says rings true, doesn't it? As modern U.S. citizens we know this; independence is our creed. Bruce and I are being reminded of this as we watch Jacob Sankara adjust to being a young adult here in the U.S. Coming from Africa, Jacob is used to always being in community. Here he needs to do things alone. He needs to be independent. Independence is our creed. We don't want to be a burden. We learn this from little on up. It's part of the air we breathe. Which is an interesting way of putting it, considering that, according to this verse from Hebrews, the very air we breathe is actually populated by the great cloud of witnesses which surrounds us. It's true that we have freedom to make choices and live our lives, but what we don't always recognize or

take advantage of is that we are also part of a community which helps us live faithfully and do things well. We are part of a community that together can keep the terror at bay. If we are to be healthy and to thrive, we will give help and receive help; both are necessary in the interdependent family of God. *Since* we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, those still living as well as those who have gone before, we are able to lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

I'd like us to pay tribute to our cloud of witnesses this morning by vocally giving it form right here in this room. We will do this by naming names. We will start by hearing the names of folks dear to us who have died in this past year.

Our sister Charmaine Burbank died on November 6, 2016.

Edith Yoder's brother, Jacob Kreider, died on December 31, 2016.

Audrey Ruth's father, Willard Tieszen, died on January 8, 2017.

Dave Owen's brother, Donnie Owen, died on January 30, 2017.

Art Umble's father, R. Claire Umble, died on April 19, 2017.

Mark Miller's father, Dale Miller, died on May 1, 2017.

Our sister Martha Zook died on May 29, 2017.

And I'm aware that this day, October 29, is the third anniversary of the death of our dear brother, husband, father, Merv Eigsti.

Each of us has loved ones who have died, loved ones who helped shape our lives and our faith. Each of us has been influenced by folks we might not have known personally but who lived lives or wrote things that give us hope. Take a moment and think about who these people are for you. [pause]. Now, together, not waiting for each

other, let's speak their names out loud. Let's give voice to the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, encourages us and upholds us here in this sanctuary today.

[Speak names]

Because of all these people who have gone before, and those with us here and now, we are able to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Because of all these people, and those who are with us here and now, we are pointed "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." Because of all these people, we know who we are and where we belong. We are brought in into the larger, eternal circle of life. This is no small gift. Thanks be to God.

It's perfectly OK to get some thrills from imagining ghosts and goblins and from scaring ourselves with witches, vampires and haunted houses. This is probably cathartic in some weird way. It definitely seems to meet a societal need. But as Christians we know that death is nothing to be afraid of. Hold that thought: Death is nothing to be afraid of. In Christ, in God, we are eternally held. We are eternally known. We are eternally part of the goodness that animates the universe. When we die we become part of that great cloud of witnesses, singing God's praises and willing the way forward to a new heaven and a new earth. We may occasionally imagine otherwise, but this is what is real. We belong to God. Amen.