

Sermon Notes – November 1, 2020*“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”*

Revelation 7:9-17

Let me remind you today that in Hebrews - we don't know exactly who the author of that book was - some say it was the Apostle Paul; some say it was Luke; some say it was Barnabus or Silas or others who traveled with Paul. Most scholars tend to think that it is some of the writings of the Apostle Paul. I want you to know that whoever the author was, they were trying to encourage the Christians - Jewish Christians who were being persecuted by fellow Jews and the Romans. The Romans were against the Christians and the Jews were trying to get the Jewish Christians to do the animal sacrifices and everything that the Jews had always done. They were being persecuted and were straying from their faith in Christ. The author of Hebrews wants to encourage Christians to stay strong and persevere in their faith.

I hope you will go back and read chapter 11 of Hebrews. This chapter gives a list of Bible heroes of the faith - major and minor characters in the Bible - men and women who God worked through to try to establish his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. There were people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Samuel, Samson, Paul, and others - and most of all, Jesus. In Chapter 12, he says “therefore” meaning “look back at what I just said to you in chapter 11 -- look at all those heroes of the faith, and I want you to remember them and let their faith-life encourage you.” “Therefore let us look at that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us and let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let us run the race of faith with perseverance.”

Now the Apostle Paul often talked, as the Greeks did, about races. He compares our faith journey, our faith walk, as that of a marathon race. Now often in Greek society they would run a race in a stadium. They came out with whatever they wore on their waist and they had a cloth (a tunic) on over it. That tunic was kind of heavy so they would throw it off. Sometimes they would throw their sandals off and run barefoot. Sometimes, as any runner does, they would be tempted to just give up the journey - they are gasping for air; their sides are aching; their feet are hurting; their shins are burning and they want to quit; they're hungry; they're tired; they didn't eat right to prepare for it -- they just want to quit. The Apostle Paul is saying that in the race of faith, sometimes we get tempted and want to give up too. We want to quit. Tragedy or suffering hits our life - something out of the blue hits us and gets us

distracted. Sometimes it's sin that causes us to be distracted from walking with Christ.

Some of you have watched the "Star Wars" movies - you've seen the trilogy. In the end of the last trilogy, 600-year-old Yoda is laying on the ground dying and he's trying to give Skywalker (who wants to be a Jedi space fighter) words of wisdom and encouragement. He says, "Remember, Skywalker, that the strength of a Jedi is the force. Beware of fear, hatred, anger, and jealousy and anything of the dark side because when you give it control in your life, it will take over. Don't underestimate the power of the enemy." Sometimes sin comes in our life and it can distract us from living for Christ and it hurts our witness. God wants us to be all that we can be - for him.

Some of you remember the great country music star Johnny Cash. He didn't always have such a good life or an easy life. Many of you know that he was a well-known country star in Nashville. He sang gospel, hillbilly, rock-and-roll, and country. He had a good life, he thought. But, he also had a difficult life because he fought his addiction to drugs and alcohol for ten-plus years. Johnny Cash said, "My sin was my drugs and alcohol controlled my life and it made me do things that I shouldn't have done, and I hurt people I shouldn't have hurt." The turning point in his life came when he was arrested in Lafayette County, Georgia. He said that the sheriff arrested him for driving on the road drunk, being under the influence of amphetamines and drugs, and he also had a bag of amphetamines with him. They arrested him and took him to the jail. The sheriff locked him up, but Johnny Cash was able to get bail and get out the next morning. The sheriff came back to the jail the next morning to let Johnny out. The sheriff took the bag of pills that he had collected from Johnny the night before, pushed them into Johnny's chest, and held them there. He said, "Johnny Cash, my wife and I are two of your greatest fans. We've listened to you on the radio and TV; I've bought your albums; my wife and I have attended your live concerts. But, last night when I arrested you, you broke my heart. I went home at dinner and told my wife that I almost wanted to resign being a sheriff, but I didn't. Here! Take these drugs and do whatever you want with your life but just remember this: It's your free will and your choice. You can save your life or kill yourself. It's up to you. Get out of here and don't you come back to my town." Johnny Cash said that sheriff's straight talk was enough to make him go home and tell his wife, "I can't fight this battle by myself. I need help. I need God, and I need your support and help." He went into a Christian rehab and stayed in it for a month or two. He said

that he asked God to help him. It was only through the help of God and the support of Christian friends that he got clean. He said, "I want you to know that I had to fight that battle every day to not get back into those drugs and alcohol." Johnny Cash had people watching him.

You and I have people watching us - and sometimes our sin distracts from our Christian witness. Paul says, "Let go of the sin in your life. Confess, repent, and ask God to help you. Know that there are friends who will encourage you along the way."

Sometimes a marathon racer gets distracted by falling over a rock or stumbling or whatever and they want to give up. Sometimes we want to give up in life - in the Christian faith. Somebody lets us down and hurts us - maybe it's somebody in the church, a friend, a co-worker that betrays us - but something happens, we get distracted, and we want to quit living and serving God and living by faith. These people who were our great cloud of witnesses weren't perfect. They were saints but they were not perfect - and neither are we. He says, "Keep your eyes on Jesus."

Think about people in the Bible. Think about David and what all God did through him. But guess what? ... David was the one who committed adultery with Bathsheba. He saw her on the rooftop sunbathing; he lusted after her; he sent his men after her; he had relations with her and then he sent her husband into battle and had him killed. David wasn't perfect. Think about Abraham and Sarah who wanted a child. God had promised them a son but they couldn't get pregnant - so after a while, Sarah gave her handmaiden servant to Abraham. They had a child and Sarah was jealous of that child and that wife. She wanted Abraham to send them away - and he did. Later they had a child, but I want you to know that they got impatient. ***It's just like us - we're not perfect and neither were that great cloud of witnesses. But God didn't give up on them.***

The late Dr. Carlyle Marney who was a great preacher - an American-Baptist preacher - once said, "Because God doesn't give up on us we shouldn't give up on ourselves." Sometimes when we've committed some sin, we feel like God could never use us again. Sometimes when we get distracted by something else we feel like God can't use us... But God can! ***These great cloud of witnesses weren't great because of who they were - it was because they trusted God. They knew God was with them and God could do in and through them what they couldn't do themselves. The only perfect person is Jesus Christ - not us. Sometimes we get our eyes on one another and not on Jesus.***

Sometimes tragedy comes in our lives, doesn't it? It can really make us think and back up and back away from the faith and the church. Sometimes it's the devastating loss of someone close to us. Sometimes it's a terrible diagnosis from a doctor. Sometimes it's the loss of a child. It may be the betrayal of a co-worker. Somebody at church hurt our feelings or let us down and we want to back up from our church and our faith. But Paul says we are to persevere in the faith. *How do we persevere in times of tragedy?*

I would like to give you an example of somebody who did just that - who rose above his tragedy and God used him to inspire and encourage and motivate others who were struggling too. Some of you know the name Merrill Womach. He just died in 2014. He attended Northwest Bible College; he graduated from there and married his college sweetheart. He and his wife started a music store. He had a beautiful singing voice -- some called him an Italian virtuoso. He could really sing and belt it out. He became known for singing in churches and doing concerts. As time went on, he began to get tired of driving out of state and flying commercial planes to get to different churches to speak, so he trained and got his pilot's license. He had a friend who had a small 4-passenger seat plane and he often borrowed it to fly to these different places. One night he was flying from San Diego to Spokane, Washington to a church to do a concert. His plane began to have some mechanical problems - it began to lose altitude and it clipped the tree tops. The plane crashed and exploded. He was by himself but managed to get out of that plane, burned and temporarily blinded. He crawled and half-walked to the edge of the woods to get to the highway and there a passing car saw him. They stopped their car and offered to help because they knew that it was a long way to a hospital. The man and his wife put Merrill in the backseat of their car and took him to the hospital. Now you remember I said that he was a singer? The couple said he was singing all the way to the hospital - songs of faith. When he got to the hospital, he collapsed and became unconscious. He ended up spending months and months in the hospital, having numerous surgeries and skin grafts. The only part of his body that wasn't burned was from his neck to his waist because he had a wool jacket that insulated him some. But his face was disfigured; his hands and his legs were burned badly. At one point he wanted to give up - but he didn't. He kept singing songs of faith in the hospital and the nurses overheard him. After months he went to rehab and he was still singing songs - even when he was in pain. The nurse said he would be humming or singing. They said, "Mr. Womach, we have a couple of

patients here who want to give up and they just want to die because of their physical conditions. They just want to quit. They physically and emotionally want to die. Would you sing to them and encourage them? You have such a strong faith and you are still singing to God. Would you encourage them?” He went down the hall in his wheelchair - bandages on his hands and legs, his face disfigured - and he kept singing. He turned into a room where the patient could see that he too was burned, and they heard him singing. They said, “How do you do that?” Merrill said, “Because of faith in God and the encouragement and prayers of friends. God gave me a song. God gave me a voice to sing and I sing because God gives me strength in it.” The nurses said that his singing inspired and encouraged those who wanted to give up to keep trying... maybe God wasn’t through with them yet. I want you to know that Merrill Womach went on to sing in nursing homes and hospitals. Two or three years later his wife asked why he didn’t go back and sing in the churches like he did before... and he responded, “I don’t know if I can.” He eventually did sing again in the churches. I want you to know what he was doing before he died. He and his wife started something called The National Music Service. Merrill Womach was a singer for funeral homes. He started this music service because often, people in the funeral business, need someone to do singing. He started singing and recording so that funeral homes all over the country could use his music. That’s what he did for the rest of his life. He, his wife, and three kids had a wonderful life and he was quite a testimony to others and lifted their spirits - people who wanted to give up. ***He said, “I learned through my tragedy to rise above it - that God was with me - and God had Christian friends praying for and encouraging me along the way. God gave me a testimony to encourage those others who physically and emotionally wanted to give up.”***

Tragedy comes to all of us - and pain and suffering. Sometimes we want to give up. God didn’t send it, but it has happened to us and God can turn it around and use it to bless, encourage, and inspire others. We often get distracted, but Paul calls us to persevere in the race of life - in our faith journey.

There’s a man named Felix Carvajal who was a Cuban postman. Back in the 1904 Olympics, Cuba didn’t have a team to participate. The Olympics were to be held in St. Louis, Missouri. Cuba didn’t have a team, but Felix was determined that he was going to run the marathon. I want you to know that he did his own fundraising. He ran in his postman’s boots; he cut off his shirt sleeves and cut his pants to shorts; and he ran that way.

He figured his experience in being a postman and walking and running on his track gave him the experience of running in a marathon in the Olympics. He raised enough money to get himself from Cuba to New Orleans. When he got to New Orleans, he ran out of money. He had to do some more fundraising. Since he didn't have money to get from New Orleans to St. Louis, he ran and he hitchhiked his way. He got all the way to St. Louis. He was hungry and exhausted. Some of the other runners felt sorry for him and offered him a pair of sneakers. Felix rejected them. He said, "I've been running for the last two years in my postman's boots. I'll keep running in them." They gave him something to eat, he got some rest, and he competed in the Olympics. Guess what? ... He came in fourth place in the Olympics.

Perseverance. God calls us to persevere in the faith and keep our eyes on Jesus. You and I are tempted to just keep our eyes on other people and when they let us down, we are hurt and dejected. We feel disappointed, and that's natural. But our eyes are to be kept on Jesus, who is the perfect example of faith. He's the one that endured pain and rejection and scorn and sacrificed his life on the cross for us. He's our example on which to focus our eyes.

Who is the person that has encouraged you in the faith? Who, living or deceased, has been a living example of faith in God to you? Who has encouraged you when you were going through a difficult time in your life and they encouraged you to stay in there? Hang in there. Go the distance. ***You see in a marathon they have to keep their eyes focused on the finish line and that's what we, as Christians, are supposed to do - keep our eyes on the finish line -- Jesus.*** Jesus is standing there cheering for us. The Apostle Paul reminds us that there is a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us - the people who have gone before us who are cheering us on. But our greatest cheerleader is Jesus. And did you know that we are cheerleaders for one another? There are living saints and deceased saints and we are those living saints. We're not perfect. We're flawed... but guess what? ... God doesn't give up on us. God keeps molding and shaping us and working in spite of who we are and what we've done. God wants us to persevere until we come face to face Jesus one day.

I have some stories to share with you from people in this church of those who have touched and shaped their faith journey. This first one was written by Jeanne Michael: "Trinity Church is like a second family to me. I've been blessed to be a member of this church since I was a young child

because of my parents, Paul and Faye Smith. Church became a part of my life and they set an example by living God's word through their actions. As such, I learned the meaning of 'actions speak louder than words' and 'God is love.' My parents' love made me the person that I am today and I cherish the time that I will be able to be with them again and one day be with our Heavenly Father."

Pat Bowers wrote this one: "When Rev. Peggy asked me to write about saints that have influenced my life and Christian growth while growing up at Trinity, I did not realize how difficult it would be. I first thought, of course, of my mother. She is who made me who I am today. She taught me values - such as love and the strong importance of family. My mother taught me how to grow up with strong and helpful family members and she was always there for me. My next first thought of a saint was Mr. Fred Fox. Although not a perfect man, Mr. Fred was an example of what I believe a saint to be. He showed his closeness and his connection to Jesus by the way he lived his daily life. When I looked up the definition of a saint, I learned that scripturally speaking the saints of the body of Christ are Christians and the church. I certainly have been influenced by members of my church family throughout my entire life. Their teachings, their leadings by example, and their leadership have had a great influence on my life and I truly celebrate and thank all the saints on this day."

This one is from Monica Wise: "When I was asked to write something for All Saints Day, I have to say, it was a no-brainer. The first and really only person that came to mind was my brother, Matt who passed away unexpectedly from an aneurysm almost ten years ago. Next to my Dad, he was the first boy to love me. Even until the day he passed away, he loved me and my daughters unconditionally. His smile was infectious. His heart made of gold. His friendship would last you a lifetime. Some of you knew him. Some of you didn't. But if you did know him, you were blessed because you made a friend for life. And if you didn't know him, I hate that he passed away too soon for you to meet because you would have loved him too. Matt passed away at the age of 33 - the same age that Jesus died. Not a day goes by that I do not think of him. I miss his laugh, his hugs, hearing him say, 'hey sis,' and boy-oh-boy do I miss watching those Tennessee Volunteer games with him. I honestly miss him terribly; however, by the blood of Christ, I know he watches over us. We see him in a butterfly that comes around. We see him in our dreams. We see him in everything that God our Creator has made. So today, on All Saints, I wish to remember him - not with sadness, but with

celebration. And as a final thought, I'd like to leave you with a poem that someone shared with me many years ago...

Do not stand at my grave and weep - I am not there. I do not sleep.
 I'm in a thousand winds that blow. I am the soft falling snow.
 I'm the gentle flower of rains. I am the field of ripening grain.
 I'm in the morning hush. I'm in the graceful rush.
 Of beautiful birds in circling flight, I am the stars shine of the night.
 I'm in the flowers that bloom. I'm in a quiet room.
 I'm in the birds that sing. I'm in each and every thing.
 Do not stand at my grave and cry - I am not there. I did not die."

And then I have one last one from Natalie Inman: "When I think back over my almost 40 years at Trinity, I can't help but think of the wonderful people that I have worshiped with along the way. Some of these people are no longer with us but their presence had a lasting impact on me. One person whose memory always puts a smile on my face is Chip Graves. Chip was always happy and full of joy! He loved Trinity and we loved him! I can remember my mom and I staying with him many Sundays during worship so his mother, Miss Dorothy could attend service. We sang songs, told stories, colored pictures, solved puzzles, and took walks. Chip had many obstacles and lived a life that some people would consider difficult. Chip certainly didn't think so. He loved his family, friends, and most importantly Jesus. I always knew that Chip was one of God's special creations and was given a special gift to make others happy! I think we can all learn from Chip by focusing on what is important; friends, family, and most of all Jesus!"

I don't know who your living and deceased saints are that have been a witness to you in your Christian faith - a source of encouragement and strength, but I want to remind you that you are living saints. There are people who are watching what we do and say and how we do and say it. There are people that need our strength and encouragement along the way. Thank God today for those saints, living or deceased, who have had a part in your life - in making you who you are. **May you go forth to be somebody else's strength and encouragement. God didn't create us in a vacuum. He created us to be in relationship with Him and with one another. May we go forth as living saints to witness of our faith. Amen.**