

Today I have asked all of you to bring a picture of a saint in your life that has made a great impact on your faith. This year, the saint who has been on my heart the past couple of months is Donna Jones. At my first appointment to a church in Newport News, Virginia, Donna Jones was the church administrative assistant. Donna had been at that church working in this position for over 25 years. She knew her stuff and she knew how to keep this mid-sized church running like a well-oiled machine.

Also, she was kind and patient with me as I was new in ministry and learning the ropes. Donna and I spent a lot of time together as we were usually the two people who were at the church the most. I would always go to her office in the morning and she always greeted me with joy and a huge smile.

I was about the same age as her daughter, Maria, so she kind of adopted me like a second daughter. Her faith was strong. On the most difficult days at the church when she had to deal with difficult people and situations, she would draw strength from her faith and people would walk away knowing they were loved even if she did not agree with them. I learned a lot from Donna, and we shared life together. I would take her to get to car worked on and she would drive me to the airport.

Donna was an amazing disciple of Christ with a strong work ethic. Even though she battled cancer during my four years there, she worked up until a week before she died because the church was important to her and she served God with each and every breath in her body.

As we all think about the saints in our lives today, we give thanks to God for these amazing examples of faith, these people, who helped us lay a strong foundation for our own faith.

Today we remember that these saints are still cheering us on to do the work that God has called us to do!

The bulletin cover today is a rendition of the “great cloud of witnesses” we heard about in our Scripture from Hebrews 12. This picture comes from the ceiling of a Roman Catholic Church in Pudua, Northern Italy. It was painted by Giusto de' Menabuoi in the 1300's and is on the ceiling of the church. The friar there explains this painting exists: “for the purpose of uniting new believers to the Lord and His church....so when someone came out of the waters of baptism, they would see a representation of what and who they were just joined to: Jesus Christ as the Lord of Hosts, arrayed in the midst of the saints.”¹

This life of faith we enter upon our baptism is a beautiful one. The moment we enter this covenant with God it never ends, in life in death, or in life beyond death. In the painting, Jesus holds upon a book which reads: “I am Alpha and Omega” reminding us of this everlasting relationship with God.ⁱⁱ

So often I talk about the gift of the church, the gathered community. The people who are with us as we do life with day to day, but as we see today through our Scripture today, the church, the kingdom of God extends beyond the life of the living.

Through Jesus Christ we are connected to the saints that have gone onto glory. We especially see this connection in our creeds and during the sacraments of baptism and communion. In the Apostles’ Creed we say: “I believe in the communion of saints.”ⁱⁱⁱ In our baptismal liturgy we respond: “I believe in the communion of saints.”^{iv} In our communion liturgy the pastor proclaims: “And so, with your people on earth and the great company of heaven we praise your name and join their ending hymn...”^v You see, the saints are still a part of the church universal today and they are cheering us on in this marathon called life.

Through Hebrews 12 we see the imagery of a race. We hear the hindrance of sin named. We all know that there are so many things in life that get in the way of embodying our faith, but this Scripture reminds us, if we keep our mind on Christ, the perfecter of our faith, we can finish the race.

In a study done by NBC News in 2017, the reporter noted that 95% of people who start a workout regiment with a friend end up reaching their verses the 76% who completed a workout routine on their own.^{vi} And I think these statistical findings also carry over to our faith. We do better practicing our faith when we do it in community.

This is why we come to worship each Sunday. To worship God in community, to know that we are not alone, to look at the beautiful stained-glass windows dedicated to the saints in the church. From these things we gain strength for the week ahead and in these moments worship we experience “thin places.” This refers to the moments when we feel the presence of God more strongly or the presence of the saints cheering us on.

The Scriptural context for this phenomenon is of course the moment that Jesus was crucified. We hear in Matthew 27:51 that the veil separating the people from God in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. Through Jesus Christ’s death for all our sins and his resurrection we could be directly connected to God.

Throughout Scripture we hear about the words veil and cloud. The veil in the Old Testament was in reference to the veil that Moses wore when he came down from the mountain of the Lord. His face was still shining from being in the presence of God, so to make the Israelites less afraid of him and to make him more approachable, he wore a veil over his face.^{vii} We also hear about the veil that was set up in the temple between the people and the ark of the covenant.^{viii}

The cloud in the Old Testament referred to the way that God appeared to the Israelites, in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.^{ix} We see that both the cloud and the veil were God’s protective measures to keep humans alive who would die if they were in God’s immediate presence.

All this changed with Jesus Christ, the word of God appeared to us enfleshed without the need for a cloud. Instead, the cloud now referred not to God’s presence, but to the presence of the saints who have gone on to glory. So, these thin places are the moments we feel a direct connection to God or the communion of saints.

In reading the book “Final Gifts” in my Pastoral Care class in seminary I heard stories about people who, towards the ends of their lives would reach out their hands to heaven, who would tell their loved ones that they were seeing those who had passed away.

Having not experienced this phenomenon for myself in seminary I wondered... “Is this for real?” But I can with confidence tell you after ten years of ministry that I have witnessed people at the end of their lives in these “thin places” as they have one foot on earth and one foot in heaven.

I have seen them sit up look straight ahead and beam. I have seen the look of peace on their faces when they tell me they recognize the face of a loved one. So, I have been convinced that one of God’s gifts to us towards the end of our lives is the gift of getting a glimpse of the life of the communion of saints.

We also see one person in the Bible who got to have this same kind of experience. In Acts 7:55 we read: “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Stephen, a disciple of Christ, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit was given a glimpse of heaven before he died. This is our hope in Jesus Christ. That our relationship with God never ends.

The good news for our lives today is that we no longer need a cloud or a veil to encounter the living God, all we need is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that helps us keep our faith and the one who connects us to the great cloud of witnesses.

So, the question before us today is how will we also as Paul in Ephesians 4 encourages us to “live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received”? You see sainthood is not someone only bestowed upon those living their resurrected lives. We are living saints, those made holy by our faith in Jesus Christ to do the work of the Lord.

No matter what season of life we may find ourselves in, like our Old Testament Scripture from Ecclesiastes, we have the opportunity every day to love God and love other people. How will we use the gift of our lives to serve others in the name of Jesus? When we do this the legacy of the cloud of witnesses lives on within and through us. May we all give thanks to God for the saints in our lives today and take what we have learned from them and put into action in our daily lives our passion to love God and others. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://artandtheology.org/2019/08/13/cloud-of-witnesses-artful-devotion/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ UMH P. 881.

^{iv} UMH P. 35.

^v UMH P. 13.

^{vi} <https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/why-you-should-work-out-crowd-ncna798936>

^{vii} Exodus 34:29.

^{viii} Exodus 26:31-35.

^{ix} Exodus 13:21.

Additional Resource

The New Interpreter’s Bible. Vol. XII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1998.