

All Saints Sunday November 3 2019

Luke 6:20-31

My father, Jim, is into genealogy. He's gone back through the family records...all the way back to the first time the Middleswarth clan crossed the Atlantic in the 1600's.

I have always been fascinated by this history, perhaps because we lived so isolated from it in Charlotte, NC...540 miles from his hometown of Laurelton, PA. A small town nestled in the valley just east of State College, PA (where Penn State University is). A region filled with Lutherans, with Pennsylvania Dutch, with farmers and families rooted in that place for hundreds of years.

I remember growing up with some of these names ringing in my imagination, most specifically Ner Middleswarth. This ancestor of mine lived between 1783 and 1865. He served in the Pennsylvania House for 26 years starting in 1815 with two terms as Speaker. He served as a member of the Pennsylvania Senate, and a single term as a US Representative 1853-1855.

I had ancestors who fought in the Revolution (Ner's father, John), in the War of 1812 (Ner), and the Civil War (Nephew's of Ner-for the North- a bit of an issue for this child born in the South).

Growing up, I felt the presence of these important people in my life. An awareness of being part of a family that served others. That served their country and fellow citizens. A pressure (not unwelcome) to live up to the model they set for me, their descendent.

But it wasn't just about those who were already dead. I also heard the stories told about my grandparents Fredrick and Beatrice Ewald and Raymond and Edna Middleswarth and I saw firsthand how they were dependable members of their community and of their churches. They were solid people, not reaching the heights of widespread popularity or success like old Ner Middleswarth, but who were known in their own little corner of the world as people to go to, to depend on, who had wisdom to share.

It is with this history in my head that I heard a quote this week from author Linda Hogan's book *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*.

"Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands."

What an awesome, powerful, frightening, inspiring thing to do. Stop, be still for a moment, and think of all the ancestors behind you. Ancestors who stretch back hundreds, thousands of years. Whose DNA you carry in your bones. Whose love, generation after generation, eventually brought you into being.

It sure puts the lie to the idea that we are self-made people, doesn't it?

And as I lived, I was aware of needing, no- wanting to live up to the example that these ancestors had set for me. The examples my grandparents and parents had set for me. On how to live. To be honorable, faithful, compassionate, kind. To look out for others before myself. To not take myself too seriously or at least look chagrined when I was called out for doing so.

And even as I was my own person, unique in that extended line of the Middleswarth clan, I was also a product of them, carrying something of their spirit

into the 20th and then 21st centuries- 400 years after the first of them came to these shores.

My siblings in Christ, the celebration of All Saints Sunday is, for us, that moment that Linda Hogan describes in her book. A moment to be still. To watch and listen. To remember, that we are the result of the love of thousands. But even more so, a result of the love of God expressed to us in God's Son, Jesus. Who came down to us, even as he comes down off the mountain to those gathered on the plain. Who came down to us to heal us, to soothe our troubled spirits, to free us from all that binds us.

We, the assembled saints who are the church, are the result of his love. His love that drew those crowds together seeking healing. That gathered disciples who followed in his path. That grew apostles, to be sent out to proclaim to others the good news that they had found about God's love for God's people.

We are the result of that raggedy bunch discovering that following Jesus, for all its challenges and strangeness, brought life. Life fuller and more abundant than the life they had before.

And so, when we look back today to all those who have died in the last year, we remember the example they have set for us. In faithfulness. In love. Some of them in proving that you don't have to be perfect to be a follower of Jesus. You just have to trust. In Christ. In this imperfect community that is the church.

We look back and remember not only those who have died in the past year, but all those other ancestors in the faith who have meant so much to us. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, teachers, mentors. Some part of the church

triumphant and some still walking with us. Stop for a moment and think about who those ancestors in the faith are for you. Picture them in your mind, standing behind you.

Do you have the picture? Focus on one. Is their name in your mind?

Then I would invite you on the count of three to speak their name aloud.

Did you feel that? That wind, that breath, that great cloud of witnesses who is present with us at this very moment? As we named them?

It's unfortunate that we no longer have cemeteries next to churches. But if you go to many rural churches, you will find that they are there. And invariably that they are located behind the front wall of the church, directly behind the altar.

That is deliberate. Because we understand that those who have died in the faith continue to be part of the assembly of the saints. When we worship they surround the other part of the table. They complete the circle with the table of Christ, the table he shares with his disciples, where he feeds us, at the center.

The communion of the saints we proclaim as true in the Apostles' Creed means we believe that when we share this meal, we are at the table with all those who have eaten of it all the way back to Jesus and the twelve around the table, and all the way into the future with those who will look back upon us in the same way we look back on those we have just named.

And it reminds us of something we too often forget in the church today. That we are saints, too. That saints, those whom God has called, that God in Jesus Christ

has claimed through baptism, are also those who live out that faith now, here, in 2019 at St. John on the corner of Walker and Rowley.

And it reminds us that as saints, we need to remember not only those who have come before us, but those saints who will come after us. We give thanks for those saints both living and dead who thought beyond themselves and built a building to worship in. Who built a parsonage to house their pastor. Who gave of their time, energy, and resources so that we might have this place. A visible sign of God's faithfulness.

And we feel the pressure of those saints (not unwelcome) to live up to the example they have set. To ask ourselves, how are we planning for those future believers? What gift are we leaving them that their ministry might better reflect the love of God in Jesus Christ. That they might better declare all that God has done for them.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us, is the gift of community. Of knowing that in anything we do, we are not alone.

So, let us take our time this all Saints to give thanks to God not only for those who have died in the past year, but also all those thousands whose faith has brought us to this place. And let us think also of those who come after us, and ponder the ways in which we might live a life of faith and generosity, following their example of service to the one in whom they trusted. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.