

The Great Race©

2 Corinthians 9:6-15, Hebrews 12:1-3

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Today, we gather for this special memorial service, to remember and give thanks for those who have gone before us and to celebrate the memorial gifts that have been given and used to the glory of God in this past year.

Of course, we give thanks for all who have died and for all the gifts used over the history of this church! We do this memorial as close to All Saint's Day as possible as we remember all those faithful believers who have finished the great race and are now cheering us on in that great cloud of witnesses.

Many of us tend to think of people like St. Francis, Mother Theresa, St. Augustine, John Paul the second, Rosa Parks as saints. We know that our Catholic friends have many Saints that have been vetted as being those extraordinary heroes of faith. And I don't disagree with that one bit!

But, in so many of Paul's letters, written to the new churches and the early Christians, he addresses them as saints. For instance, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, he begins with ² *"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours ..."* (1 Cor. 1:2)

And in Ephesians 1 he begins his letter: *"To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus..."* (Eph. 1: 1)

Paul seems to believe that all people who have put their trust in Jesus Christ and who are working for the Kingdom of God in Christ's church are saints. They are people who show the love of God in Christ to others; they are those who are striving to be like Jesus – generous servants whose lives exemplify the sacrificial life of love they see in the one whom they follow.

November 1st is known as "All Saints Day." Carl L. Schenck writes in his commentary on the saints:

"On All Saints Day we in the church of Jesus Christ remember all the saints, the heroic ones and the ordinary ones. Frederick Buechner in his book, The Sacred Journey, has written of this day..."

"On All Saints Day it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and the overbearing ones, the broken ones and the whole ones, the despots and the tosspots and the crackpots of our lives who—one way or another—have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints and whom we love without knowing we love them and by whom we were helped to

whatever little we may have or ever hope to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own."

Schneck writes, *"I like that. I like thinking about those folks who have helped me along the way of my seedy sainthood. As you look down that list of the saints that we honor this day, you see a great and wondrous variety of human beings."*

Each were very different. Different personalities, different expressions of faith and caring. Each individuals who had an influence on many of us. Dorothy Leaming, Margaret Rainey, Ron Howe. We also have just recently lost our friend, Barbara Wells, but because it was so soon, we decided to wait and include her in next year's Memorial Service, inviting her family then.

I like that term "seedy saints." We ordinary saints are not perfect, yet we are in the race, as Paul puts it in Hebrews, being cheered on by that great cloud of witnesses – those saints who have gone before us – as we keep our eyes on the goal which is Jesus Christ.

When we confess our faith in the Apostles' Creed, we say "I believe in the communion of the saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." We confess that the saints are communing with God, with each other and even with us as we are encouraged by them.

I often think, when at the table for The Lord's Supper, as we will be in a few minutes, that there are a host of others around this table in spirit, even though not in body. We don't know for sure just how close those loved ones are.

Yet, Paul expresses that they are there, helping us to grow in faith, helping us to develop our saintliness, helping us to reach that goal that they have reached – our life of faith that shows others the light of God; a faith that leads to our eternal home.

Peterson says it this way in the Message translation of Hebrews 12:1-3: *"Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in."*

They say faith is believing in something we cannot see. In faith, we believe our loved ones are with God and that they are encouraging us.

But one thing we do know, because we *can* see it, is that the gifts they have left us that *are* tangible, and that we *are able to see*, are the memorial gifts and the bequests that are given in their name so that their own legacy of generous giving to the church of Jesus Christ continues on.

Those gifts are used in many ways: They are given as scholarships for the greater education of our young ... gifts will continue bearing fruit for years to come.

They are used to purchase necessary things that make the building warm and well maintained. They are used to enhance the ministries of the church like our hymnals and resources for worship and Sunday School.

Memorial gifts, given in memory of loved ones, are seeds planted and sown. Those saints who have died and left generous gifts or have had generous gifts given in their name, do not see the harvest of the seeds sown but they continue to be an important and meaningful part of the church.

Albert Schweitzer once wrote, "no ray of sunshine is ever lost, but the green which it awakens needs time to sprout, and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith."

We gather here today believing that no ray of sunshine has been lost, that even as we may come with tears in our eyes as we grieve the death and the absence of our loved ones in our lives, we know that their faith lives on in us and in the gifts that have come from their labor enabling us to be encouraged, to have a vital church and mission, and to give us even more reason to give thanks to God.

But they also set an example to those of us who are still here. I have been so impressed with older members of churches either Fred or I have served. There have been several who, knowing that they were probably nearing the end of their life on earth, discussed with us their plans for making sure their pledge to the church continued on.

They were writing it in their wills; they were leaving instructions for their children; they wanted the pastor to know where their passion and heart was for certain ministries in the church – such as music, worship, youth ministry, or building projects, mission projects.

They thought out what the church meant to them and they had examples from the saints who had taught them, and they wanted to follow in that same path and leave a legacy that would continue making sure the church of Christ would thrive for years to come.

We give thanks for the blessings of the saints we celebrate today and for all those who have taught us to live generous, Christ-like lives. For those who have been great, and for those who have been ordinary – we give thanks, for we have learned from each of them.

May we always remember that Christ Jesus is the first fruit of a great harvest of people who are raised from death to new life in our eternal home, but who leave great fruits of love and grace behind in this life.

In God's grace, we have received forgiveness, mercy, love and an abundance of blessings through Jesus Christ and for all those saints who have finished their race. Thanks be to God for these indescribable gifts! Amen.