



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Honoring Our Saints”

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-7

November 1, 2009

In just a few minutes (At 9:40 this morning) the first wave of nearly 40,000 men and women will begin running the New York City Marathon. They will thunder across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and head into Brooklyn. They will wind their way through Queens, cross the East River at the Queensboro Bridge and head into Manhattan. Heading north on First Avenue for four miles, they enter The Bronx. A short loop through The Bronx & across the Madison Ave Bridge will bring them back down into Manhattan. Once they hit Central Park, there will be less than four miles to go, but for many of the runners, those four miles will seem like 10. However, the finish line is too near to stop now and the 1 million cheering fans lining the streets will keep them motivated. The elite runners will hit the finish line in slightly more than two hours; the middle of the pack will cross between four and five hours; but some will get every bit of their money's worth and their race day won't end until after five o'clock this afternoon.

We would never toy with the idea of running such a distance without preparation. We might be able to run two or three miles without training, and if someone holds in front of us a fabulous incentive or threatens us with our life, we might be able to push ourselves to five miles. But you cannot run 26.2 miles without preparation.

The same is true with life. You cannot become a successful adult without learning how to enrich relationships; develop problem-solving skills; cultivate ways of coping; discern your weaknesses; amplify your strengths. The better the preparation, the greater the likelihood of success.

Also, you cannot run a marathon without support. We must glean wisdom from others who have pounded the pavement over that extreme distance. You acquire tips and training methods, developing a new vocabulary that includes tempo runs and intervals. You discover how petroleum jelly can save your toes and keep your legs from chaffing. Men learn a unique use for band aids. Support must also come from family and friends who encourage you to stick with the training during the preceding months and on race day are out on the course cheering you onward, handing you a sports gel or switching your water bottle.

Similarly, you cannot make it far in life without the support of others; parents and siblings to nurture us when we are young, to teach us right from wrong, to console us when we hurt and to meet our basic needs. Throughout our lives we need people who care about our day, listen to our stories, pick us up when we fall and stand by us when troubles mount.

Running a marathon is not without risks. On October 10th, Peter Curtin, a healthy 23 year-old graduate student at MIT collapsed and died at mile 25 of the Baltimore Marathon Eight days later, three runners died in the Detroit half-marathon. As our church family knows all too well, everyone does not live a long life because life is filled with risks. In a marathon you cannot make it to the finish line without ongoing nourishment. You need water or a sports drink to keep your body hydrated and you need gels or some other form of carbohydrates to avoid depleting your energy. You also need to have your psyche nourished in the form of cheers from onlookers and positive messages in your mind to keep you going when your body begins to rebel. When you hit the 16 mile marker and realize you still have 10 to go, you need something to inspire you to press on.

Of course, we also need nourishment for our daily lives; and not only physical nourishment to give us the energy we need to make it through the day, but emotional and spiritual nourishment as well. We need people to love us, to affirm us, to bolster our courage and to make us laugh. We need a sense of God's presence in our lives to give us a purpose, to find forgiveness and transformation, to dream dreams for a better world and to have hope for a new life when this one ends.

Finally, when you hit the finish line of a marathon, it is a true celebration. You are exhausted, but you are fulfilled. Your body is wiped out, but your spirit is elated. You ache in places you never knew existed, but the contented grin on your face reveals the serenity in your soul. If family and friends celebrate your accomplishment with you, it multiplies your joy.

And it should be the same with life. When we reach the finish line, although our body is calling it quits, our soul should be at peace. If we have lived a faithful existence – if we have sought to do what is right and true and good – then we ought to rest in the assurance that God will continue to care for us when we pass to the other side. This is why we call a memorial services a celebration of life.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day by remembering the ones who touched our lives and nurtured our faith, and who now live eternally with God. And since it is a day to remember our dear ones who have died, it is in some ways a solemn occasion. We're sad that we can no longer hear their voices or wrap our arms around them or look into their eyes or kiss them. We mourn the fact that we cannot ask them questions we forgot to ask when they were alive. And we have regrets for things we should have done or said but never got around to doing. So, if tears rise to the surface, do not be surprised or embarrassed. Tears are a sign that we care and crying is our body's way of releasing tension and sad emotions. Besides, a church sanctuary is one of the best places to express our grief, because it is also the place where we find healing resources.

Yet All Saints' Day is not merely a day to focus on death and to grieve our losses. It is also a day of celebration. We celebrate the lives of our loved ones, we rekindle our hope of seeing them again in God's eternal kingdom and we promise to honor them with our own manner of living. As Christians, we believe that Christ was resurrected from the dead, and we believe that we will share in that resurrection after our time on earth ends. However, what we know about the after-life is sketchy, so all we can do is speculate.

Before Tom Gillespie became the president of Princeton Seminary, he was a pastor in a church in California. One morning his secretary rang him and said "There's someone here to see you." That was her code for "Don't ask." So Gillespie replied, "Show him in!" The door opened and his secretary escorted into his office a seven-year old girl, smartly dressed and carrying herself with great dignity.

The secretary said “She has a theological question for you.” Well, Dr. Gillespie knew how to handle children, so he squatted down to her level, put his hands on her shoulders and said, “Honey what is it that you would like to know?” She asked, “What are we going to eat in heaven?”

He panicked. Nothing in his theological education had prepared him for that question. His mind raced through the Scriptures until he settled on a line from the Apostle Paul. He said “In heaven we are going to have spiritual bodies and so God is going to give us spiritual food.” “Thank you,” said the little girl, and she turned and walked out of his office. As she walked past the secretary’s desk, she leaned over and said, “He doesn’t know either.”¹

We do not know specifics about life after death. I believe that after our physical body fails, our spiritual nature is transformed and we live with God and others in a different form of existence. However, I am hesitant to speculate much beyond that. Belief in life beyond the grave gives us hope for the future and courage in facing death, but it should never prompt us to tune out the present. God wants us to focus on our current lives and how we can enjoy God’s good creation, living in rich and meaningful ways.

That’s why on All Saints’ Day we remember with gratitude those who lived their faith in such a way that it made an indelible impression on us. We can be inspired by towering figures such as the Apostle Paul, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr., but I’m thinking of the people we have known personally who lived the Christian faith in such a way that it made us want to emulate their lives. Such saints come in a variety of packaging: they can be parents, siblings, friends, teachers, spouses. These are the people who have inspired us by the manner in which they lived their faith. They showed us how to reach out to others with compassion or how to persevere when times are tough. They demonstrated the importance of loyalty or the humility that is required to forgive. They exhibited courage in the face of danger or they stood up for justice when people were treated unfairly. They possessed a special sensitivity to the homeless or found ways to lift the spirits of those who were feeling down

About twenty years ago, a high school youth group headed out on their annual work camp and backpacking trip at Blue Lake Youth Camp. One of the boys on that trip was from another church and didn’t really know the youth or the adult leaders. His name was Ben, and he was, to put it charitably, a challenge.

The youth leaders had been given the heads-up on Ben. He was a troubled youth who was often belligerent toward people in authority. It was no mystery why he was such a handful; his father was serving time in prison. The minister begged the youth leaders to include Ben on the trip and they relented.

The leaders, Bob and Margie, were nervous on the first day but it turned out to be a positive experience for everyone. Ben had a couple of minor outbursts along the way, but Bob and Margie were patient with him and they treated him with more kindness than he had ever experienced.

A few weeks following the trip, Ben even rejoined the group to share photographs and remembrances of their special time together. That was the last time the group saw him.

Fast forward 16 years. Bob went back to Blue Lake Camp. And while he was there, he noticed a man working on one of the cabins. He went over to the man and struck up a conversation, and it turned out to be Ben.

His story unfolded. After high school he went into the Marines, and after serving six years he went to college where he graduated with honors. Currently he’s married, and he is in charge of the local school district’s computer labs

He said to Bob, “That work camp experience 16 years ago was a pivotal moment in my life. It was the first time I ever felt appreciated by others and respected, and included in a group. I still cherish the memories of that trip and especially the way you and Margie cared for me.”

Bob was stunned, because he had practically forgotten the trip and he had no idea that he and his wife had such an impact on this young man.²

That’s often the way it is with saints. They are simply focused on living their faith day in & day out and they seldom recognize the deep impression they are making on others.

Today, I hope you will remember those saints who have lived ordinary lives extraordinarily well; the ones who made a difference in your life. And I hope you will tell them how grateful you are for all they did. And, I encourage you to bring honor to them by living as they would want you to live. The purpose of reminiscing on All Saints’ Day is not to yearn for a time that can no longer be recovered. Instead, it is a day to be inspired by the saints who touched our lives and who want us to take what was best in them into the future.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, “Fragile Presence: The Ways God Shapes our Faith Today,” part 3.
2. Charlotte Ann Russell, “A Summer Prayer,” preached at First Congregational Church of Berkeley on July 26, 1998.