

3 November 2024

The Communion of Saints
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12; 12:1-2

We turn at once to scripture reading selections from the Book of Hebrews, chapters 11 and 12:

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Over the past couple of weeks, I’ve talked about the ancient Christian teaching that followers of Christ live parallel lives, having dual citizenship in two nations at the same time. These nations Augustine called the City of God and the secular city. But the Latin word *saeculum* that Augustine used doesn’t refer so much to space as to time. It literally means the limited time-span of a human life. So our existing in two different worlds also means that we live in two different times – or, more accurately, two different *kinds* of time. In the secular city, we live in chronological time: time that moves inexorably forward in steady progression from past to future and that one day will come to an end. But our faith speaks of a different kind of time – time that is measured not in seconds or minutes or days or years, but rather in terms of significance. Even within our secularized minds we retain some sense of this. When we say, “Well, we *have* had a time today!” we don’t mean that the requisite number of minutes for a day have passed, but rather that this day included something significant that we will remember and cherish long after the chronological period is gone. We live mostly in chronological time. God is entirely in significant time, time that is marked by meaning, time that is indifferent to chronology. For simplicity’s sake, I will simply call this kind of time eternity.

And as with the two different cities, we have a foot in each time, and one day, we believe, we will wholly enter eternal time. We are not there yet, obviously, but we have glimpses of it, and one of the ways that we glimpse meaning beyond chronology is through ritual. When we

partake of Holy Communion, for instance, we are not just doing a re-enactment of a historical event for teaching purposes. We are joining all Christians everywhere, and all the generations before us, who have received from the Lord this holy bread, this sacred cup, this mysterious sacrifice. That dinner, sanctified by Christ Himself, is untouched by the passage of years and will retain its meaning long after time itself has ended.

And when we partake of this moment of eternity, we partake of it in the company of all those who were once chained to chronological time, as we are, but who are now free to live in significant time. This is what Christians mean by that enigmatic phrase from our oldest creeds, “The Communion of Saints.” While we trudge our way along the one-way, speed-posted road of chronological time, those who have gone before are living a different kind of time all around us.

Now don’t make anything spooky out of this. I’m not saying that we are haunted by the spirits of our ancestors or that the souls of those who have joined eternity are hovering around watching us all the time, like the ghostly grandfather in the Family Circus cartoons. Ick. I like to think that my sister Marilyn, who joined eternity some 43 years ago of our time, has something better to do with eternity than haunt my office and watch me deal with the morning’s emails. But I am saying that in those moments when we approach the thin places of chronological time, moments when meaning rings like a bell and drowns out the ticking of the clock, moments like today, we are not alone. We are joined by what the author of Hebrews called “a great cloud of witnesses”: the Communion of Saints.