

The Faith Hall of Fame
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
October 30, 2005

In the midst of Halloween festivities, we often forget its connection to the Christian faith. The word Halloween comes from Hallow E'en or Evening, meaning All Hallow's Eve, the day before All Saint's Day. Hallow means "holy," as in "hallowed be thy name." Holy means set apart or sanctified. The date of All Saint's Day, November 1, was set in the eighth century by Pope Gregory III.

All Saints' Day is a time to remember those whose lives have been set apart for God in such a way as to be examples of holy living for all Christians. It was one of John Wesley's favorite days of the Christian year. It is not a celebration or deification of the saints. Rather it is a celebration of the victory of the grace of Christ in the saints. We recognize what Christ has done in and through the witness of the saints, the holy people of God, through the ages. The saints are not simply those whom the Roman Catholic Church has canonized; the saints are common ordinary people just like us through whom the light of Christ has shined.

"Trick or Treat" came from England. Beggars went door-to-door asking for "soul cake," promising in return to offer prayers for the departed of each household they visited. Jack o'lanterns, originally made from squashes and, even today, from turnips, represented skulls, a reminder that someday all will die. Candles burning in the jack o'lanterns are symbols of the light of Christ, the hope of new life even in the face of death.¹

Acknowledging the reality of death, we are also aware of God's promise of eternal life. This morning from Hebrews we receive the wonderful image of the cloud of witnesses who are alive in the heavenly heights, who, while physically distant from us, continue to inspire, encourage, and sustain us in the faith. They have been granted entrance into the Faith Hall of Fame. From that vantage point, as heroes of the faith, they lift our spirits and convince us to hold fast to the faith even in the midst of adversity. They know that the race of faith is worth finishing, that in the end God provides us with something better.

The letter to Hebrews was directed to a church that must have felt very much alone. They were a tiny band of Christians, hanging on by a thread on the fringes of the mighty Roman Empire. They had witnessed purges, persecutions, and mocking of pagan religions by their neighbors. How on earth could they keep keeping on in the face of such adversity?

Hebrews chapter 11 reminds them that they are not the first to walk this path. Their ancestors in the faith – Abraham, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David – walked before them. They knew torture, prison, death, yet they kept walking in faith.

One of the best ways to keep going forward is occasionally look back. Athletes frequently look beyond themselves to colleagues and competitors to gain motivation, insight, and ideas. Sports Halls of Fame offer younger generations an opportunity to emulate heroes who set the standard for their sports.

Likewise, we are inspired by the faith of God's people in every time and place. We can learn from the way our fellow believers have dealt with hardship and suffering.

Biblical faith is not so much a creed or statement of belief as it is loyalty to God and trust in the presence of God with us always. Faith is expressed in a willingness to act upon a vision even though the fruit of faith is not readily apparent. In the midst of terrible trials, when the race is tough, our bodies are aching, and everything seems to be falling apart, have you noticed that there is something within that strengthens us, encourages us, and calls us to persevere? That's the power of God within, God's strength in the midst of our weakness. We tap into this power by faith, by a willingness to rely on God through every failure, disappointment, personal hardship, or disaster. We gain access to God's strength, encouragement, and perseverance by looking beyond ourselves, by learning from the stories of faithful people, and by trusting God to help us complete our race.

A sign at the entrance to the Winchester Cathedral in England reads, "You are entering a conversation that began long before you were born, and will continue long after you're dead." We are invited to join the conversation of faith, to receive the support, wisdom, and encouragement of the saints for the faithful living of these days.

Let's listen in on that conversation of faith, recalling some who have been received in the Faith Hall of Fame.

By faith, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany, objecting to certain doctrines and practices of the church, specifically salvation by works and the selling of indulgences to earn forgiveness and eternal life. His actions set in motion the Protestant Reformation, with renewed emphasis on salvation by faith alone and the priesthood of all believers.

By faith in the sixteenth century, William Tyndale determined to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English to make the Word

of God accessible to both the priests and the common people. For his efforts, he was imprisoned, tried, and burned at the stake.

By faith John Wesley defied his ordination as a priest in the Church of England to preach in the open air to the working poor shunned by the nation's rigid class structure. He declared, "the world is my parish." By faith he ordained bishops for the fledgling Methodist church in the new nation of the United States of America.

By faith sea captain John Newton gave up the slave trade, and spent the last 28 years of his life engaged in the crusade for the abolition of the slave trade. John grew blind, but kept preaching. John grew deaf, but kept preaching. At age 82 he stepped down, saying, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior. What amazing grace!" His legacy is the hymn, "Amazing Grace."

By faith Harriet Tubman escaped slavery and then returned to the South 19 times and led more than 300 slaves to freedom. By faith she was a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She never ran her train off the track, and she never lost a passenger.

By faith Anna Howard Shaw chose to be a Methodist preacher over the strong objections of her family, went to seminary, and became the first woman ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church in 1880. By faith she earned her medical degree in 1885. By faith she struck out on the temperance trail speaking about the evils of alcohol. By faith she joined with Susan B. Anthony working shoulder to shoulder for women's suffrage.

By faith George Washington Carver, born a slave, pursued a career in agriculture at the Iowa Agricultural College, graduating with an M.S. in 1897. Later that year Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, convinced him to come south to serve as the school's director of agriculture. He wrote, "I cannot offer you money, position or fame. The first two you have; the last, from the place you now occupy, you will no doubt achieve. These things I now ask you to give up. I offer you in their place work – hard, hard work – the task of bringing a people from degradation, poverty, and waste to full manhood." By faith, Carver pledged "to cooperate with you in doing all I can through Christ who strengthened me to better the conditions of our people." Signed, "God's Humble servant."²

By faith Andre Trocme, pastor of the Reformed Church in the village of Le Chambon in southern France, led his community in granting safety to over 2,500 Jewish refugees during the German occupation of France. Believing that every human life was precious, he was imprisoned in a

concentration camp for harboring Jews. Upon his release, he sought to love all persons, even the Germans who had arrested him.

By faith Rosa Parks, at the end of a long work day December 1, 1955, refused to relinquish her seat in the African-American section of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. When the bus driver threatened to call the police, she simply said, "Go ahead and call them." Her arrest and suit against segregation laws inspired a bus boycott of 381 days until the laws changed. By faith her intense personal investment changed an unjust social system.

By faith John Coltrane, saxophone player, composer, eminent jazz innovator, overcame his addiction to heroin. On his seminal album, *Love Supreme*, he testifies to God's omnipotence, our need for God, dependence on God and God's power to remake us. He dedicates his music saying, "Let us sing all songs to God."

These are among the Friends of God found in the Faith Hall of Fame. These are those who, even in the midst of their weakness, found that the grace of God was sufficient to give strength to answer the call of God to work for justice and peace. These are among those through whom the light of Jesus Christ has shone.

And to this list of witnesses, we can add our own saints, the holy ones of God who have mentored us in the faith, who have expressed the love of God through their living, and who continue to encourage us from the heavenly heights. Among these are mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, cousins, colleagues, and friends. We remember their faith, courage, and perseverance. We claim their continued support, affirmation, and encouragement as we seek to follow in the footsteps of faith, living loyally as friends of God.

"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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

¹ Rev. Kim Leslie, “Of Halloween and Paganism,” October, 1991.

² Thanks to Rev. Eileen Lindsay, Davis United Methodist Church, Davis, CA, for some of these references.

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