

Sermon Text for January 11, 2015

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Joshua 1:5-7, Hebrews 12:1-3

“The cloud of witnesses”

We had officer training yesterday and I so love teaching and training and giving people an opportunity to learn and see how they fit into the life of the church. I wanted to keep it going with you today. John Calvin who for Presbyterians is considered the one who helped define the structure and the theology of the church, devoted an entire book in his Institutes, nearly 500 pages, to an explanation of what we mean when we say that we believe in the holy catholic church. Last week we spent nearly 20 minutes as we defined it as the worldwide Christian church, the family of believers, that ought to be united by Christ and for the sake of Christ..

Part of Calvin’s explanation includes a brief description of the phrase which is our topic for today: the communion of the saints. What do we mean when we say that we believe in the communion of the saints? In some Christian circles: Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic and others, the term saint implies a person who is deceased and has preferential status that ought to be venerated. For Presbyterians it means something very different. I’ve always considered a saint in those traditions as someone whose past hasn’t been researched enough.

Calvin stated that this term communion of the saints expresses what the church is. He states that we are all members of the society of Christ and whatever benefits God gives to us we should share with others. He uses Acts 4 as an example of this society where we read “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” This communion Calvin calls the visible church. We can see each other, enjoy each other, pray for each other. But Calvin also talks about the invisible church.

In Hebrews 12 we read that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses as we go forward in our faith journey. This cloud of witnesses are those in the faith who have gone before us and will come after us, the invisible church, Calvin calls them God’s elect since the beginning of time. You see our faith is not just a personal thing between us and God as so many people think. We do not have our faith in a vacuum, but rather what has happened, is happening, and will happen around us, affects our walk with Christ. Our communion is fundamental with this cloud of witnesses. As Presbyterians we believe

that God works primarily in relationship with a people, in community, in communion. Let's learn about this communion of the saints from Scripture.

Who have been some of the most influential people in your life? Who has shaped your relationship with God or led you to a place where you could experience God? I can think of a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, my parents. We all have people right now who are flashing through our minds, people that God placed in our lives to serve as his mouthpiece and his witness to God's presence in our lives.

In Joshua, our first reading, there was one person who was the most influential in all of the people of Israel's history. That was Moses. The people of Israel saw Moses as someone that God had used directly as his mouthpiece. This reading picks up with Moses being dead and poor Joshua is given the responsibility of the impossible task of leading Israel in the wake of one who glowed, and saw God face to face. That is a daunting task.

But God gives him and the people of Israel words to calm their hearts. He said, be strong and courageous, I was with Moses, and so I will be with you. It wasn't Moses who made Moses, but it was me. If you falter and stumble, remember I was with Moses, look back at how I led him, I will lead you in the same way. Joshua, you are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses: Moses, Joseph, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham. I was with all of them. With that promise Joshua carried on and was able to lead the people to the promised land.

What we have in Hebrews 12 is a similar approach to the faith of the people in the 1st century. Again it was a time of trial and turmoil. Most of the early church leaders had died, the Apostles, the strong men of faith, and the early Christians like Joshua probably had some thoughts of: how are we going to do this on our own? The author begins by telling the readers in chapter 12: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

First of all whenever a sentence begins with therefore, you need to ask, what happened before to make this therefore? In Chapter 11 we read about the faith of our fathers, those who went before us and laid the groundwork to where we are today in our faith. The author mentions Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel. All of these men and women of the faith have created a fertile ground for our faith to grow.

The author calls them: a cloud of witnesses. This term witness has so many meanings. The Greek word is *martyria*. What does that sound like? That's right,

martyr. Those who died for their faith and held fast in their faith. I think of the Presbyterian Christians in Iraq and Syria, missionaries and locals who have stayed to proclaim the faith in the face of seemingly inevitable death. .

Witness or marturion can also mean those who testified about what has just taken place and what they experience. In the Old Testament people are witnesses to God's glory, the tablets of the ten commandments are called testimonies, wherever God encountered someone, such as Jacob in his dream or Abraham on his journeys, pillars of rock were erected and they were called witnesses. Even if the people refused to be witnesses to God's glory and presence, then the rocks and stones themselves would start to proclaim the glory of his love. We read about that in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

So what we find is a simple continuous line of faith that has passed through all of these witnesses, some true martyrs, and it has not stopped at Jesus Christ but it continued through the Apostles' and did not stop even there, but the church then picked up that line and to this day this line runs right down the center of this church and whoever enters here needs to feel that they are a part of that testimony that has gone from the Old Testament to us today. This chord that went through the cloud of witnesses now passes through each of us, as we stand ready at attention to carry it on to the next generation.

In the middle of this verse we find a sudden switch of metaphors. The author goes into the image of our faith journey, even our lives being that of a race. This past summer I began training for a marathon. It has been a challenge. When I was in college I used to run all the time, a few miles each day and I would enjoy it. A couple of us would go out and train together.

The author uses this image of a race for a reason. Because he realized that an essential part of our life journey is those who run this race of faith with us. It is not an individual 100 yard dash but rather a relay race where the baton is passed from one generation to the next. How those who went before us ran, greatly affects where we stand. If they run well and fast then we are at a distinct advantage. If they plodded and dropped the baton, then when we start we have a lot of making up to do. If we do not run this race well then those coming after us will be at a disadvantage.

This cloud of witnesses are those who in the faith have run the race and their time of departure has come. Now they are in the stands cheering us on. The author tells us that to run the race effectively we need to let go of all that may weigh us down. Let go of any weight, any sin that clings to us and impedes our progress. As we run, our goal, the

model is our Savior Jesus who was the premier runner, the gold medal holder, who is at the finish line ready to congratulate us and receive us in the winners circle.

But an amazing and important aspect of this race is that the important thing is to start the race, just start running the race and you will learn how to run it as you go. So many people are afraid to get involved in the church or even make a commitment to Christ because they feel they don't know enough, or aren't worthy enough. What we hear here is get in the race, give Christ your life and then as you run you will find the weight and the sin fall by the side. What a great image of our journey.

Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He has shown us how to run. He gives us the course by his own life of sacrifice. When we see the disciplined, loving, strong, merciful, and faithful way that Jesus ran the race, we are motivated to lace up our shoes, to grasp the baton, and to sprint to the finish line.

We find in Hebrews that Jesus' focus was on what he was accomplishing which allowed him to overlook the cross, the shame and the suffering, and focus on the glory of his salvation for all. So often in our journey of faith we are distracted by earthly things that hinder us from focusing on Jesus Christ as the finish line. There are so many distractions, life events, bad choices, and poor priorities that take us away from the course that Jesus has set before us.

Brothers and sisters, the old runners, the cloud of witnesses have taken their place in the seats in the stadium. All are watching to see how we will run the race. I know that for some of us it is late in the day, and we have already run several sprints and dashes. We may be winded and tired. But this is the only race that counts. Let us run the course that Christ has set before us, and in turn become witnesses until we pass the baton. Amen.