



November 5, 2017

Find Comfort In Our Losses  
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

**HEBREWS 12:1-2; MATTHEW 5:12-16**

**NRSV**

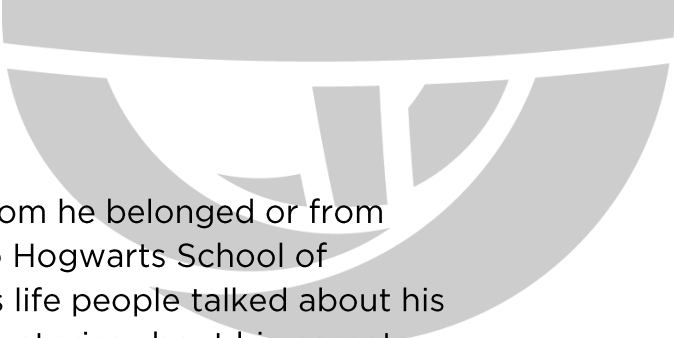
<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake 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.

<sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

<sup>13</sup>“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

My family started reading Harry Potter together a couple of weeks ago. If you're not familiar with the story, Harry Potter is orphaned when his parents are killed by an evil character named Voldemort. Harry was an infant and miraculously survived the attack. After this, Harry is raised by his aunt and uncle. They are very different than Harry and his parents. They never mention his parents to him and avoid his questions at all cost. It leaves Harry feeling terribly alone in the world and searching for answers to a million existential questions.




Throughout his childhood, he had no idea to whom he belonged or from where he came. Then one day Harry is invited to Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft. For the first time in his life people talked about his parents; and they knew who he was too. Hearing stories about his parents and what they stood for gave Harry tremendous comfort; and the courage to do what he was called to do later in life.

The Christians who received the letter of Hebrews were struggling to remember who they were and to whom they belonged. They needed a boost of courage. They faced persecution, and some were abandoning the faith. The author reminded them of the struggles of their ancestors, and the faithfulness of God to encourage them to carry on the mission that Jesus began.

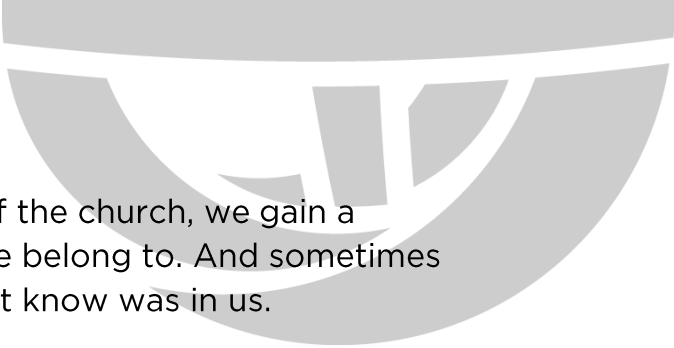
Today we remember the people who have helped us know who we are and from where we've come. In the church, we call them saints. These are not the miracle working saints that cathedrals and churches are named. They are ordinary saints, people like you and me, who the letter to the Hebrews calls "a great cloud of witnesses". They were faithful people who let their light shine and who flavored the world with their love, humor, grace, and humanity. They are our family, friends, and members of this church and the church universal; who looked to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

These saints have celebrated our successes with us, and have struggled alongside us. They have persevered through adversity and encouraged us to do likewise. They have doubted, sinned, and disappointed us. But they have also shown us how to seek forgiveness and offer mercy. They have taught us that making things right involves trusting in God's love even when life is difficult. The saints we remember today were not perfect, but they shape who we are and remind us again and again to whom we belong.

Like any witness, this great cloud of witnesses gives testimony to what others have done, namely what God has done through Jesus, in their lives. The question for us today is, "How closely have we listened? And what has their testimony compelled us to believe about God, the church, and the world? It is not a matter of whether we believe in God, but rather what kind of God we put our trust in and pattern our lives after.



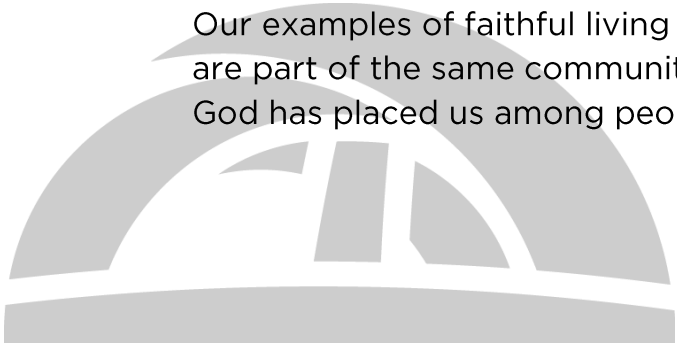
As members of the church, the cloud of witnesses extends across generations and geography to give us a wide angle perspective on God.




When we hear testimony from another corner of the church, we gain a deeper sense of what we are part of and who we belong to. And sometimes we may even sense a call to something we didn't know was in us.

You are probably aware that I will be leaving for Ethiopia and South Sudan this week. I will be with a couple of other pastors from our synod visiting Wal Reat, an ELCA missionary and several lay leaders on the border of Ethiopia. Next week, we will travel to Juba, South Sudan and join about 20 other ELCA leaders and many local Christians for the dedication of the new Lutheran Ministry Center. Many of you have expressed concern for my safety and have told me you will be praying for me. I deeply appreciate your prayers and ask that you will keep Pastor Pete and Pastor Chad in prayer as well. Some have asked if I am nervous. Others have asked if I *have* to go. I do not have to go, but there are a couple of reasons I feel compelled to go. I feel called to be a witness to the work of the Spirit among our brothers and sisters in South Sudan. In the face of ethnic cleansing and civil war, these Christians are building a church that strives to bring warring tribes together and make visible peace. In so many ways they are trying to embody the statement written on our sanctuary and live out our mission to build bridges of understanding and peace. Their confidence in God to make this happen is inspiring. They will need partners like us to pray for them and to help tell this story.

I also feel compelled to go because I believe we in the West have something to learn about being church from our brothers and sisters in Africa. We are at a crossroads in the church in America. The ways we do church isn't working as well in many places these days. We have measured success by the number of people attending on a Sunday morning and the number of dollars in the budget, rather than the number of lives changed by the grace and love of God within the church and out in the community. We often limit the heavy lifting of ministry to professionals and a dedicated core of volunteers. Because of these neatly constructed ministries, our faith is sometimes limited to what we believe we are capable of, but does not always account for the immeasurable amount of ways God is at work in each and every one of us, calling us to be ordinary saints to the next generation.



Our examples of faithful living are not limited to our own experience. We are part of the same community as those to whom Hebrews was written. God has placed us among people like Abraham and Moses, Miriam and



Mary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wal Reat, and the saint of our congregation we remember today. These people surround us like a great cloud of witnesses so that we might be bold in giving testimony to our faith as well.

We trust God is with us in birth, and death, and makes things new again. We have nothing to fear in matters of life or death. Robert Benne writes, "From a Christian point of view, we are immersed in God. God is the hot furnace of love out of which all things come and to which all things go...[our] conviction is that all this activity issues from the plenitudes of [God's] being, from his lovingkindness." When you feel burdened by life or lose track of who you belong to, remember that God's love is what forms you and that God's love surrounds you with a great cloud of witnesses to urge you on and usher you home. Amen.

