



Sunday, Nov. 1, 2020  
*Sermon Series: Strength for Today, and  
Bright Hope for Tomorrow*

A Peace that Endures  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

### **Hebrews 12:1-3 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>3</sup>Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Today is All Saints Day, the day after All Hallow's Eve. It's a meaningful day for so many of us. We're reminded of loved ones who've gone before us in the faith, both during this past year and also in years gone by. As time passes, we may get over the pain of grief, but we never forget these dear saints. And we never stop loving them.

Recently Vikki Dalquist sent me a copy of a note she found written inside her grandmother Myrtle's Bible. The note was written by her grandfather Arthur. Arthur must have been missing Myrtle, who had died at the age of 53. He wrote inside the cover: "God broke the mold when he created her! Never another could replace my Myrtle!"

On All Saints Day we claim to be surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses." This image comes from the book of Hebrews. Just before it's introduced, there's a roll call of heroes of faith from the Old Testament: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, and others too. These faithful souls are part of that *great cloud*. They've run the race with perseverance. They're weren't always sure where they were going or what God's promises would mean for them in the end, but they trusted that God would be with them every step of the way.

We don't know much about the background of Hebrews, but it was likely written at a time when first-century Christians were facing great uncertainty and struggle. Some days, when it got bad enough, they were tempted to renounce their faith entirely. "Don't give up!" the author is saying. "Just like the heroes of old, just like Jesus himself who endured the cross, do not lose heart! Christ has taken his place at the right hand of God. Whatever else that means, God's promises will lead to a peace that endures."

Whether in the first century or today, we're on a journey of faith. That journey connects us with other believers. We do our best to support and encourage each other, but the isolation of COVID-19 has made that difficult. Over the past nine months, finding safe ways to say goodbye has become very challenging.

*We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.* On All Saints Day especially we're keenly aware that all things living must one day die. Faced with the prospect of dying, life often takes on a preciousness that we scarcely notice when things are busy. Something as simple as an orange sunrise or a warm bowl of chicken noodle soup or a few minutes at the bedside of a family member – if we're fortunate enough to get it – can gladden our hearts and fill us with gratitude.

I've been reading a book by David Kessler entitled *Finding Meaning*. Kessler is a former colleague of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who wrote the seminal work: *On Death and Dying*. Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Kessler has now added a sixth stage: *meaning*. Keep in mind: these stages are seldom linear, but we often experience various aspects of them along the way. What Kessler is contributing is the sense that – long after the funeral is over, and we've worked through at least some of the pain, and maybe even come to a measure of acceptance, we would be well-served in our goodbyes if we search for meaning in the life and death of the person we've loved.

Kessler tells the story of Gail who gave birth to a son named Branden. Branden was born with spina bifida. There were lots of challenges along the way. Branden had to use a catheter to go the bathroom. He wore braces on his legs and used a wheelchair. Yet Gail was determined to give him a good life. Thanks to Gail, Branden grew up happy. He loved the color yellow, and he took a liking to cars, especially yellow Volkswagen Beetles.

When Branden was seventeen, Gail walked into his room one day and found him unresponsive. He was transported to the hospital and the doctor gave Gail the heartbreaking news that Branden would never wake up. The doctor asked if she might consider donating his healthy organs. Although she could scarcely process what was happening, she agreed to the donation. If those

organs couldn't save Branden's life, at least he could help save someone else. Without realizing it, Gail was seeking meaning in her son's death. She sat with him as they removed his breathing tube and he quietly died. Gail believed he went home to heaven.

A few years later Gail was moving into a new apartment. Her other son, Bryan, was at summer camp. Gail was unpacking boxes. A knock came at the door. She had arranged for a person to come and paint the apartment using Branden's favorite color, yellow.

The painter's name was Ken. He began his work. They chatted briefly. "Do you live alone?" he asked her. "My son, Bryan, is away at camp."

"Do you have any other kids?" Gail had dealt with the awkwardness of that question before. This time, for some reason, she stood there wondering what to say: "I had another son named Branden who died at seventeen."

Ken replied, "I always stick my foot in my mouth. So sorry for asking." "It's okay," she told him. And he continued to paint.

After a few minutes, Ken said, "I'm sorry about your son. I know what it's like to be sick. I almost died four years ago at the age of forty-two, but my life was saved by a kidney transplant. I just celebrated my four-year transplant anniversary last month."

Gail's interest was piqued, "When did you have your transplant?" Ken answered, "February."

"February what?" "February 13, 2008," he said. "I'll never forget the date."

Gail responded, "Branden died on February 12, 2008." Ken marveled, "What a coincidence! My donor was a twenty-one-year man who died in a car accident."

After their brief exchange, Gail continued unpacking, and Ken went back to painting. Gail went out to run an errand. When she got back, Ken was standing in the middle of the room. He had stopped his painting. "Is there something wrong?" Gail asked.

"I lied to you," Ken admitted. "You're not a painter?" Gail asked. "No, not about that. I have Branden's kidney." Gail was in shock, "What?"

"When you told me that Branden was your son's name and you were Gail, I realize that I'd received a letter from you after I had the transplant. I was then given the option to write back to you. And I'm so ashamed, but I never did."

Gail later called the transplant center. Everything Ken shared checked out. What were the chances? With over 1,800 painters in Buffalo, NY, was this merely an astonishing coincidence? No, not according to Gail. As she saw it, it was meant to happen. It was a validation of everything she had done after Branden died. Something good had come out of something bad.

David Kessler drew his story to a close: “Every life has meaning, and so can every death.” It might not be as dramatic as an organ transplant. It might be as simple as lighting a candle in honor of loved ones and giving thanks for them. Still, every death can have meaning. If we search for it and find it, we may have a peace that we did not have before.

*We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.* Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel writes, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” As we said earlier, “bearing witness” has become incredibly difficult during our pandemic. Many of our funerals have been happening at the cemetery. Lorraine Larson died in March at the age of 98. According to son Mark, she was ready to go. She wasn’t afraid. She believed in Christ’s promise to go and prepare a place for her. But, Mark adds, she took all the time she could to get there.

Lorraine’s funeral was at the graveside, next to her husband Ed. It was especially meaningful because Lorraine’s twelve grandchildren wrote remembrances. Each got 75 words or less. Mark read them. They were deeply touching. Those grandchildren were home watching the service on a zoom link. They, along with Lorraine’s great-grandchildren, were all dressed up, because that’s what “Grammy” would have done.

In a world that readily rushes on – back to work and kids and life – we must find ways to stop and bear witness to a life and death that mattered. It doesn’t have to be complicated. Even a simple card or a phone call is a start. Considering the state of the world in which we live, there’s probably no greater gift we can give to the grieving than to remember a loved one, ask about him or her, and then listen with our full attention. Hopefully it will provide a moment of peace.

*We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.* In a mysterious way, we sometimes sense those who have died close beside us. We wonder: maybe they’re not so far away, after all. Maybe they will continue to influence our lives for months and years to come. Maybe our love for them will never end.

My mom battled cancer for the last five years of her life. She died when I was 14. She spent the last couple months lying in a hospital bed set up in our dining room. There were eight of us children. We tended to her needs, made

sure she took her medicine, got her something to drink, brought her a plate of food, spent time with her – gathered around the bed - in prayer.

As I remember it, we didn't talk a lot about the cancer. It had metastasized to her bone. She was in a lot of pain. But there were other things on my mother's mind. She wrote notes to each of her children. I've still got mine. She wrote to me: "To Vernon, first boy, pride and joy. I hope some day you'll experience the joy of having a son. You were so important that we had to give you four names: Vernon Olof Samuel Christopherson. Samuel was my own promise to God, because we weren't certain we could have children, but as normal parents we prayed that it would be possible. I prayed Hannah's prayer, that if he ever gave me a son, his name would be Samuel. Grandma Christopherson thought you should also have grandpa's name, so Olof was added too. You were well-watched by your three older sisters. Your favorite pastime was not toys, but dragging out all of my kettles."

My mother's notes didn't stop there. Faith was important to her. As she was dying, she did what she could to tend to the faith of her children. She left us with a series of exhortations, including these: "1) Remember your Creator in the days of your youth; 2) daily seek him in his word and in prayer; 3) develop the talents God has given you, and use them for God's glory; 4) cultivate a taste in good music; it is one way to draw near to God; 5) study diligently and prepare yourself for the tasks God will give you; 6) daily do your duties to lighten the load for others; 7) love one another in the Lord."

When I read through these notes, I am profoundly grateful for the love of my mother and for her deep commitment to tend to the faith of her children. They bring me peace.

Today is All Saints Day. We're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. As I see it, they're not so far away. Their life and their death had meaning. We give testimony to their passing. And we give thanks for tending to their faith and the faith of their children.

Arthur had one more thing to write in Myrtle's Bible: "Adversities keep you walking with the Lord, and without them you are apt lose your way." Thank God for the great cloud of witnesses. We need them. In a world of uncertainty and struggle, we don't want to lose our way. And even if we can't always see what's down the road, we trust God promise to lead us to the peace of Christ, a peace that endures. Amen.