

LIVING IN THE SHELTER AND THE SHADOW¹

Psalm 91: 1-6, 14-16

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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It was reported this week that in a small diner in Oregon, someone called the waitress over and pointed to two National Guardsmen eating at a nearby table, and said, "Bring their tab to me; I will pay for it." When the National Guardsmen found out that someone else had paid their tab, they called over the waitress, pointed to another table, and said, "We'll pay their tab." Soon, as people in the diner discovered what was happening, more people were calling over the waitress and pointing to other tables, until everyone was paying for someone else's meal. Generosity is catching!

I

Today we have before us a group of faithful people who have pointed to the next generation and said, "We'll pay their tab." The 50-year members whom we honor today represent a generation who, by their faithfulness to this church, have made it possible for the rest of us to benefit from the ministries of this church.

It is appropriate that we honor them on Thanksgiving Sunday as well as Pledge Sunday, for we are in their debt. We are deeply grateful to them as well

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as those who are now with us only in spirit, for they paid our tab, and we are the recipients of their faithfulness. These “fathers” and “mothers” of the church are our veterans who have served through the years, in season and out, and their faithfulness bears witness to their love for this church. We salute them; we thank them; we honor them.

Every time I have seen spiritual renewal in a church, it is accompanied by gratitude and generosity. One clear barometer of spiritual maturity in a church is the role of generosity as seen in the pledges made to support the church. This is not secular fund-raising; it is Christian stewardship, a reflection of our relationship with God. So it is equally important that we honor these faithful 50-year members on Pledge Sunday. Our gratitude spills over in generosity.

II

We opened worship today by singing that most familiar Thanksgiving hymn, “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come,” a hymn that reaches back deep into our souls and resurrects memories of Thanksgivings past. Then for our scripture today, we heard the familiar words of Psalm 91: *You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”* You don’t need to be a doom-and-gloomer to feel the need for shelter and refuge these days. To pray this psalm is to be honest about our need for shelter. We all need God’s shelter.

As a teenage boy I used to hike on the Appalachian Trail. All along that beautiful trail that rides high on the ridge of the Appalachian mountains from Maine to Georgia, there are wonderful little shelters. They are not fancy—just log shelters, which in the early years had only three sides, which meant that all they could do was to shelter you from rain and storm. Now most of them have a wire mesh on the open side to shelter you from the bears that roam the trail. There is hardly a more welcome sight to a hiker than those shelters. To say that we live in the shelter of the Most High is to recognize that we are all of us on a journey and need that shelter.

One of the things I remember most about those shelters is the instant camaraderie inside. Hikers on that trail meet some weird birds in those shelters, and I do not mean the feathered kind! You end up sleeping in that shelter with people who are very different from each other. But they are gathered within the shelter of the Appalachian Mountain Club. They all need shelter, and they are all grateful to have it. They inevitably tell stories, share food, warn of difficult parts of the trail up ahead, and even lend each other bandaids for blistered feet. There is camaraderie within the shelter in spite of all the differences.

The church, too, offers shelter. We proclaim the grand truth of Christian faith that nothing will ever *be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ*

Jesus our Lord. Those within this shelter may have disagreements, but they are worked through with mutual respect and the common recognition that we all live within the love of Christ. And when we say that nothing can separate us from that love, we are affirming a truth that is greater than all our differences.

When we place the welcome statement in our worship bulletin saying that “God’s unbounded love and grace are offered to all persons, of any age, race, sexual orientation, denomination, cultural background, and economic means as integral members of God’s family,” it is not because this church is more liberal than others; it is not because we are in full agreement over all the great moral and ethical issues of the day; it is not because we are more tolerant than others; it is not because we are all of the same political persuasion; and it is certainly not because we are trying to be more politically correct than others. We welcome everybody because we recognize that ALL God’s children need to *live in the shelter of the Most High...in the shadow of the Almighty!* And whenever fellow travelers come round the bend in the trail and see that shelter, we are not going to shut the door in anyone’s face.

III

We have much for which to be grateful today. We have these wonderful 50-year members to honor. We have generous people whose pledges represent their devotion to this church and promise for the future. We provide

and support ministries that make a difference in this community. We have serious people who are willing to grapple with the ethical and moral dilemmas we all face; and we have a church genuinely trying to follow the Way of Christ.

Today, as we approach the Thanksgiving holidays, we give thanks that we are all living *in the shelter of the Most High...in the shadow of the Almighty*. That eternal truth is far greater than any differences in our opinions. If we can demonstrate a community of faith that can live together within the shelter of the Most High, then we will make an impact that future generations will celebrate.

Mother Teresa, the saintly nun who gathered in the dying outcasts of Calcutta and gave them shelter and love literally until they died, had a little poem that hung on the wall of her orphanage:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.²

² http://prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm.