

SAINTS REMEMBERED AND SAINTS TO COME¹

Hebrews 12: 1-2

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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The World War II generation had a wildly popular song with the lyrics, “I’ll be seeing you in all the old familiar places....”

I

Today, the 70th anniversary of that great day when this church building was dedicated, many of us can relate to the song. We look out at this old familiar place, and we see people who have long ago left us. Many here have deeply personal memories of growing up here. Many can see their parents and grandparents sitting in the very pew where they sat; and if they concentrate, they may be able to hear their familiar voices.

I know that feeling. It is good to have those memories. It is a memory of saints past. When we use that word “saints,” of course, we do not mean saints the way popular religion usually uses that term. We mean generations of men and women, boys and girls, who love the Lord and who live lives that show it. When we speak of the communion of saints, we do not mean people who would only be comfortable in a stained glass window. We mean ordinary

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, September 20, 2009. The title of this sermon is borrowed from the title of a sermon by Walter Brueggemann, in *Inscribing the Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 145. The content, however, is mine.

people who take seriously their faith and try to follow the way of Christ the best way they can. This church has been full of those people over the years.

We can imagine that day 70 years ago. There was a sea of people; the women with their Sunday hats...the men with their suits on and their hats placed in the hat rack in the foyer. The pastor, the Rev. Thomas Roy, with his distinctive formality, welcoming the congregation to this glorious day. Everyone here that day remembered the horror, the grief, the disbelief that jolted them just as the church was preparing to celebrate its 125th anniversary. Their beautiful sanctuary on Ionic Avenue had been destroyed by fire just two years earlier. And now feelings of pride and joy welled up at the completion of this new sanctuary and church building on the corner of Salisbury Street and Park Avenue! To them, it was a dream come true.

For this special occasion, Thomas Roy had secured the era's most famous preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York. Fosdick's wife was Florence Whitney, who grew up in this church. In his autobiography, Fosdick has a wonderful passage about their courtship. He writes,

Our Victorian courtship would likely amuse the current generation. We took books, especially poetry, and driving a horse and buggy into the countryside, read together in some comfortable nook. My preliminary

collapse at the first sight of her turned into utter rout. I was my own man no longer and never have been since.²

We can imagine Fosdick standing up in this pulpit to preach the dedicatory sermon. Sitting toward the front are Mr. and Mrs. Whitney, beaming with pride over their famous son-in-law. Sitting near them is Mr. Harry Stoddard, who has just formally accepted the keys to the church in behalf of the congregation. Throughout the congregation, there is a sense of pride and optimism over the prospects of the future of this church.

A little girl in another church was once asked, "What is a saint?" She looked up at the stained glass windows and said, "Oh yes, the saints are the ones the light shines through." There have been many saints in this church, and the light has shone through them reaching us to this very day.

On this anniversary day, we remember those through whom the light shone. These were people who were confident that the good news of Christ was not only for our personal lives, but also for our corporate lives: it applied to all the issues of war and peace, race and economics, schools and health care, homelessness and hunger, the whole gamut of issues we deal with today. These were people who were absolutely convinced that the gospel had a good

² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *For the Living of These Days* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 68.

word to say as they took seriously the call of Christ to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Today we give thanks for them as we remember the saints.

II

But we all know that today, as much as it stirs our memories, is not primarily about the past. For nearly 200 years this church has borne witness to the faith we hold. Through good times and bad, bull and bear markets, war and peace, high attendance and low, this church has been aware of and grateful for its past. This church has chosen to follow the way of Christ into the future for each generation.

The cadences of the text we read from Hebrews are oh, so familiar to us all: *Therefore, 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.* That text comes immediately after an entire chapter listing the heroes and heroines of the past, starting with Abraham and Sarah and going all the way through King David and the prophets. Then the chapter ends with these words: *Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God*

*had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.*³

In listing all those famous ancestors who did well, we are told that their work, as important and significant as it was, was still incomplete. There was more to do. Then the text makes a strange statement: *...they would not, **apart from us**, be made perfect.*⁴

The point being made is this: in some sense, how their lives count depends on our lives! How well they did is determined by how well we do because we are called to carry on their good work. The baton is passed to us, and if we drop the baton and lose the race, then all the running they did in their lap around life is incomplete! In a real sense, OUR faithfulness effects the ultimate impact of their faithfulness. The race is not won, the job is not complete, until our generation takes up the task where they left off.

This text was written to the people of the early church when faith was not easy, the culture was not supportive, the deck was stacked against them, all the breaks were for those who supported the empire, jobs were scarce, the economy was shaky, persecution was common, and the outlook for the future of the church was bleak! It was saying to them, "It's up to you! You must

³ Hebrews 11:39-40.

⁴ Hebrews 11:40.

decide if the sacrifices they made were worth it! When you add up all the work and sacrifice of those who sat where we sit in this building over the last 70 years, in some sense the sum depends on what we do now! The present, in other words, has enormous power to bring completion to the work of the past. This generation has the immense opportunity to supercharge and enhance what the previous generations have done.

Thus our task today on this 70th anniversary of the dedication of this building, is not just to remember the saints of the past, but to prepare for the saints of the future and to be the saints of the present. We have been thrust into an era of economic insecurity, ethnic and racial tension, religious diversity on a scale we have never known before, declining mainline attendance, institutional disillusionment, distrust of government, violence in our streets and too often in our homes and schools, ideological rigidity, rampant consumerism, fear of terrorism, anger at anything that resembles authority, and public rudeness.

What a wonderful time to be an authentic church!

III

A stranger came into the church the other day and told me that he grew up here, but now he lived in a distant city and just wanted to see this place

during his visit to Worcester. I asked him what he remembered most about his years here, and he said, "My baptism."

He remembered his baptism. At our baptism we made a promise to follow the way of Christ wherever it would take us. No one made that choice for us. Like the nostalgic visitor who came into this sanctuary last week, we have not forgotten it.

Now we will act on that promise. Some of us are long-time members of this church with generational memories of this place. Some of us are newer members, grafted into this community. Some are brand new, here perhaps for the first time. But wherever we come from, whoever we are, whatever our background, we share the promise of baptism to follow Christ in our generation, to be the saints of the present.