

Hebrews 11-12:2

Title: *Our Ancestors*

Hebrews 11:1-12:2 (selections)

¹Faith is the reality of all that is hoped for; the reality of all that is unseen. ²Because of faith, our ancestors were approved by God.

³By faith, we understand that the world was created by the word from God, and that what is visible came into being through the invisible.

⁸By faith, Sarah and Abraham obeyed when they were called, and went off to the place they were to receive as a heritage; they went forth, moreover, not knowing where they were going.

⁹By faith, Sarah and Abraham lived in the promised land as resident aliens, dwelling in tents with their children and grandchildren, who were heirs of the same promise – ¹⁰for they were looking forward to the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God.

²²By faith, Joseph, near the end of his life, recalled the Exodus of the Israelites and made arrangements for his own burial. ²³By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth. They defied the royal edict because they saw he was such a fine child. ²⁴By faith, Moses, now an adult, refused to be identified as the son of the Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵He chose to endure ill-treatment along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered disgrace for the sake of the Messiah something more precious than the treasure of Egypt. He was looking forward to his reward.

³²What more can I say? There is no time for me to give an account of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Deborah, Jephthah, or David, Samuel and the prophets. ³³These were those who through faith conquered nations, did what was just and earned the promises. They shut the jaws of lions, ³⁴put out raging fires and emerged unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength, became brave in battle and put foreign invaders to flight. ³⁵some came back from the dead to their spouses by resurrection. Others submitted to torture, refusing release so that they could rise again to better life. ³⁶ Still others endured mockery, beating – even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, sawed in half, even beheaded. They were homeless, dressed in the skins of sheep and goats; they were penniless and given nothing but ill treatment – ³⁸ the world wasn't worthy of them! – and they wandered in deserts and slept on mountains and in caves and ravines. ³⁹ These are all heroes of our faith, but none of them received what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect apart from us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside everything that impedes us and the sin that so easily entangles us. Let us run with

perseverance the race laid out for us. ²Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection.

Constance and her companions

In the 1870s a small group of nuns relocated from the east coast to Memphis, Tennessee. Shortly after their move, yellow fever swept through that city for the third time that decade. More than half the city packed up their bags and left when the sickness began, they had seen the death and devastation of this disease. The nuns, known as Constance and her companions, stayed put.

They took care of those dying southerners with their thick Yankee accents, they laid cold rags on hot foreheads and emptied bedpans full of contagion. Perhaps they thought God would protect them from the virus, that God would reward their service, or perhaps they were not thinking about themselves at all. I read that if you look really hard for it, you can find this square marker with all their names on it in Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis: Ruth, Frances, Thecla, and Constance.

The Martyrs of Memphis.



We believe in *discipleship*, the production of people who more closely resemble, in their life-style, their beliefs, and their values, followers of Jesus. We generally don't want people to just know about Jesus Christ, we want them to know *and* to follow Christ. The whole person fully engaged in the process.

Discipleship, following in the way of Jesus, is not something that comes naturally. It must be learned. Stanley Hauerwas, in his book *Resident Aliens*, makes the claim that, a primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples. An essential role, then, of the church is to put us in contact with those who are models of the Christian faith – for you new saints, to meet the former saints – for the young to be in relationship with their elders. There is no substitute, says Hauerwas, for living around other followers of Christ. In being around others who are seeking to faithfully follow the ways of Jesus, we learn that it is possible to take great risks and to make great failures – we learn to forgive, because God has forgiven; we learn that what we have is not ours but God's. We witness the courage of ordinary people who find their lives caught up in the purposes of God. In terms of ways of knowing, there is no substitute for “saints” – palpable, personal examples of the Christian faith.

Martin of Tours (397 CE)

Martin of Tours lived in the late 4th century, born and raised in modern day Hungary. As a young man he was involuntarily enlisted into the Roman army. Martin became a Christian when, as a Roman soldier, he was traveling through a city one day and saw a man begging for alms. Martin did not have any money, but was moved by the plight of this man and so, Martin took his own

coat in half and gave half of his coat to this beggar – to help cover him and keep him warm. That very night, the story goes, Martin dreamed of Jesus wearing half of his coat. After this, Martin became a Christian. After he became baptized he was determined that he must leave the Roman military because he believed that Jesus called his followers to the way of peace and nonviolence. Martin's superior officers thought he must be a coward, to this he replied that he would be willing to go to the front lines of battle, only that he would not take or use a weapon again. His superiors did not send him to the front lines, but rather to jail. Eventually, he was released from prison and became a monk, eventually he served ten years as the bishop of Tours.



When you start reading about these saints, one of the first things you notice is that they were not, well, saints. Legend has it that Saint Francis used to roll naked in the snow to defend himself against his lusty thoughts and Saint Christopher was on his way to work for the devil when a mysterious hermit recruited him for God instead. Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for seventeen years before she met Christ, left her brothel and became a desert mother for the next fifty years. Our own Anabaptist saint Conrad Grebel is thought to have died of syphilis, having lived a fairly wild life before his conversion. Generally speaking, the saints are not

distinguished by their goodness. They are distinguished by their extravagant love of God, which shines brighter than anything else about them.

Despite the great legends that have grown-up around these saints, they really are ordinary men and women whose love of God has led them to do extraordinary things, which, of course, means none of us can shrug our shoulders and say sainthood is beyond our reach.

Corpus Christi Saints

At Corpus Christi House, our local homeless day shelter in Boise, we have a few every day saints. There is a man in his late forties or early fifties who comes into Corpus every week – every single week – usually on Monday, but sometimes later in the week. He finds one of the office volunteers and hands up two, crumpled-up twenty-dollar bills. They are crumpled because he doesn't want anyone to see them. He doesn't say much, just "Here you go", or "see you next week." I don't even know his name, we just call him the "\$40 man." On our petty cash log, every week there is a line in the "plus" column, that reads "40 dollar man." One time, after telling him thank-you, I think I sort of embarrassed him, and he said, "well, I was spending that much on going to lunch every week. I thought this was a better place for that money."



Two years ago this past August, at Corpus we rented a school bus for a field trip. It is the only time we have done a field trip at Corpus since I have been around. About thirty of our guests came and more met us there. It was to go to Holy Apostles Catholic Church in Meridian for the funeral mass of one of our long-time volunteers, Dorie. Dorie volunteered at Corpus twice a week for a decade until she got sick.

There are many signs of a life well lived, I could not claim to know them all, but I am pretty positive that a bus full of homeless citizens showing-up at your funeral service, is such a sign.

We cannot understand scripture, says Will Willimon, without the lives of saints to guide us. The words of Jesus, the words of the prophets, often are not understood without a community to help open these words to us. This community is not just the gathered community of people who see the scriptures differently, it is not just the community of scholars, professors, and theologians. It is also the community of the saints, those who have gone before us, showing us with their lives what these stories. These saints have shown us, in their actions, what it means to “love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.” They have shown us how to love our enemies, and taught us who is our neighbor. Without lives of saints we dismiss much of what we find in the prophets and the gospels, thinking, “this is not possible” or “this is not for our time.” The saints help us see that, it just might be possible.

Osceola McCarty

Osceola McCarty was from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. She was a laundress with little education, forced to drop out of school when she was in the sixth grade to begin a lifetime of washing other people's clothes. This was the year her aunt came out of the hospital unable to walk and had to move in with Osceola's family. Twelve-year old Osceola left school to care for her aunt and help her mother and grandmother with their backyard laundry business. By the time her aunt finally recovered, Osceola felt she was too old and too far behind to return to school, so she kept on working.

For the next seventy-five years that is what she did, scrubbing dark clothes on a washboard and boiling the whites in a big black pot in her backyard before hanging them on the line. This was her life, six days a week from sun-up to sundown. It was not until she was 87 years old that people like us hear of Ms McCarty, that was when she gave \$150,000 – her life savings – to the University of Southern Mississippi to be used for scholarships for black students. She says that the most frequent question she gets is, “why didn't you spend that money on yourself?” To which she answers, “I am spending it on myself.” Smiling the slyest of smiles.



We remember saints today – saints who seem to be powerless by the world’s standards – those who live with the poor and outcast are not highly regarded in our culture; those who stand for justice are usually mocked and imprisoned during their time on earth; those who are ready to forgive enemies often meet untimely end. God does not promise us that if we forgive our enemies they will repent – they may simply kill us. Though they may kill us, mock, or imprison – they cannot determine the meaning of our life or our death. That is why we talk about our saints not as victims, but as martyrs. God empowers us through the remembering of the saints. In the telling of their stories we help to break the power of fear, the power of death, the power of comfort. In the telling of their stories we claim them as our own.

St. Maximilian Kolbe

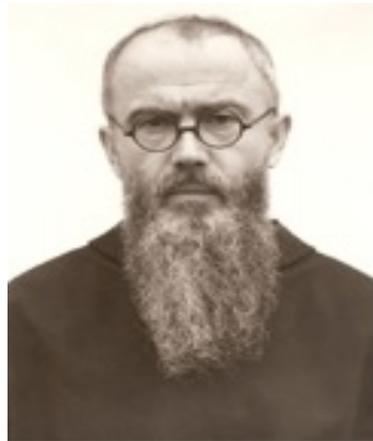
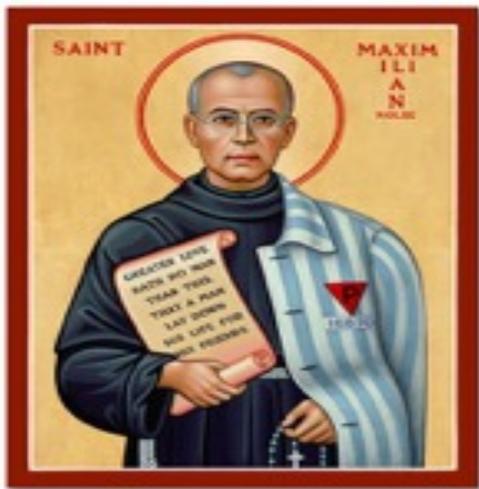
Masimillian Kolbe was a polish monk. When Germany invaded Poland, Kolbe was one of the few brothers who remained in the monastery, where he organized a temporary hospital. He was briefly arrested after the Nazis took control of his city, upon his release, he continued work at his monastery, where he and other monks provided shelter to refugees from other parts of Poland, including 2,000 Polish Jews whom he hid from the Germans in their friary. His monastery also continued to publish religious writings, a number of which were anti-Nazi publications.

On February 17, 1941, the monastery was shut down by the German authorities. Kolbe and four others were arrested by the Gestapo and eventually sent to Auschwitz where we became prisoner #16670.

In Auschwitz, he continued to act as a priest for people at the camp. Later that year three prisoners disappeared from the camp, prompting an SS commander to pick ten men to be starved

to death in an underground bunker to deter further escape attempts. One of the men, [Franciszek Gajowniczek](#), when he was selected cried out, "My wife! My children!" Upon hearing this Brother Kolbe volunteered to take his place.

According to an Auschwitz assistant janitor at that time, in that bunker he lead his fellow prisoners in prayer, and each time the guards checked on him, he was standing or kneeling in the middle of the cell, looking calmly at those who entered. He died two weeks later.



On All Saint's Day, writes Barbara Brown Taylor, we make the very bold claim that all these people are our relatives. We have the same blood running in our veins – Christ's blood – and the same light we see shining in them shines in us too. One of the reasons we do this is that we want all of you new saints to meet the old ones. We want our children and all those who are part of Christ's body to know who their family is, who their ancestors are, and to understand that being a saint means first and foremost belonging to God.



Whether you feel like your saintliness report card is an A+ or more of a D, you are part of God's family, part of our family, you belong to God. All that remains is to continue to see what role we play within our family system. You just have to be you – the one of a kind, never to be repeated human being whom God created you to be. You do not have to be famous, or perfect, or even dead. You just have to be you. A beloved child of God, seeking the ways of God here and now.

Thanks be to God for the all Her Saints. Thanks be to God for you. Amen and amen.