

Feast of All Saints  
November 2, 2014  
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Someday I hope to have a cloud of beautiful white hair. Like my mom, or Dee Runmark or Jan Yanzer. I already have plenty of grey – carefully camouflaged - but abundant nonetheless. Mine isn't striking silver or shining white, just steely grey mixed with mousy brown. I don't want steel grey mixed with mousy brown. So I spend precious family financial resources on the Clairol camouflage. But someday. Someday I want a great cloud of white hair. Because, well...I want to look like a saint.

Yes, a saint. This week, in preparation for the feast of All Saints, I was reading the Letter to the Hebrews. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, the author recounts the faithfulness of a great list of the long dead founders of the faith: Abel, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. And then the author says: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness, 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..." When I read this, I see not just the great cloud of our faithful dead, but I also see the great cloud of our faithful living witnesses. And I see clouds of glorious white hair.

Earlier this week I was at the Clergy Appreciation Luncheon at Covenant Village where Ruth Christine, Lil and Elizabeth live. During the time of worship, preacher talked about how older members of congregations can serve in the role of encouragers.

As I looked across that room, across the cloud of witness, across the cloud of white hair, I thought of the multitude of witness that is with us in worship here week after week. The

witnesses who started this congregation and taught Sunday School, served on council and mopped the floors before many of us were born, baptized, or confirmed. So if I may, I would like to take a moment to talk about you. Not as if you weren't here. Not as if you cannot speak for yourselves. But because we celebrate our young families and our children and our confirmands and our newlyweds. Today it is your turn.

It is easy to be dismissive of people with white hair. As bodies grow frail, we all too often assume that the ability to contribute has grown frail as well. But it occurred to me that those of you with white hair (some perhaps camouflaged) are more than encouragers. You are witnesses. You are witnesses to the power of the gospel and to the importance of faithful perseverance. Because you are still here. And by still here, I don't mean still alive. I mean that you are still here. In this place. Still part of this or any church. Still running with perseverance in the face of generations of unmet budgets, failures of leadership and of nerve, an almost hostile culture and sea changes in what it means to be the Lutheran church in America. And you are still here.

I agree with that pastor from the luncheon. Older members can be encouragers but not because they are old. You can be encouragers because you have shown us the rest of us how to live. You have known loss, grief, despair and defeat and you have done more than just survive. You have persevered. You have shown us how to rise again, how to perceive God at work in, through and around you. You have known joy, success, accomplishment and celebration. And You have shown us how to be humbly grateful for every blessing that comes from God.

Perhaps the thing that I have missed in all this is the thing that now amazes me the most. We too often think of our older members living in the glory days. Days when we had 40 kids getting confirmed at one time. Days when people dressed up for worship. Days when we used the organ every week. And everyone prioritized worship and Wednesday nights. You get the idea.

But these members know something else. They know what it means to commit your life to the body of Christ. They have lived through mergers and watched favorite hymns and liturgies disappear from hymnals. They have accepted women as pastors when once they didn't even serve on council. Some of them are openly embracing our gay and lesbian members and the rest are learning how. Because they have seen the church weather all kinds of changes. They aren't stuck in the past. They are hopeful for the future because they know what church can be when we lean in. When we commit our whole selves to a life of faith, to our life together in community and when our money leads our hearts and our hearts end up following Jesus.

This is what older members can do. They can tell us stories. Not of the glory days. Not of the scandal or the fights. They can tell us stories of what it means to be church when the storms roll through. They can tell us stories of their faith and how they rose from the ashes of loss. They can tell us stories of those who have been served by the church when no one else would have them. They can tell us stories. And we need those stories.

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In the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus speaks the beatitudes, the "Blessed Be's," Jesus is not issuing a new set of beautifully worded commandments. The beatitudes are not a list of "shoulds." The beatitudes are a description of those who have hungered for Jesus and those that have been designated for blessing by Jesus. The poor in spirit, the merciful, the meek, the

peacemakers. These are not people that typically succeed according the world we have constructed for ourselves. But they are Jesus' people. And they are many.

Now keeping this idea of the blessed many in your minds; turn to the words of hope and comfort we heard this morning from Revelation. Note the opening words: "I looked." Have we looked? Have we seen the blessed many all around us? Jesus's blessed people are a great multitude, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. They are not just the people of our congregation or our denomination or even the whole Christian community.

Jesus' ministry was built on shattering barriers. From the hungry to the leprous to the sex workers to the widows and the outcast, Jesus reached across society's boundaries and lifted them up and blessed them. Jesus's ministry was not defined by denomination, city charter, school district, socioeconomic class or race. Jesus' ministry was founded on a broad understanding of this extraordinary kingdom of God where instead of the survival of the fittest few, the meek are blessed. This extraordinary kingdom that culminates in a multicultural, multinational gathering at the throne of God.

On Tuesday you have a responsibility, a duty even, to vote. You will make your own decisions. It is not the place of your pastor or your church to tell you for whom you should cast your precious vote. But it is my responsibility as your pastor to encourage you to vote and to encourage you to take to the polls a faith that has looked and seen the multitude before the throne of God. Cast a vote that reflects your understanding of the kingdom of God as Jesus has described it.

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In the New Testament, the word saint never means the select or the set aside. The word saint always means us, the hopeful faithful. The very young, the middle aged and that cloud of white that together make us Valley of Peace. Our older members have voted for decades. They remember times when race was set against race, young were set against old, men against women. And they lived to tell the tales, they can share stories of times changing, boundaries being moved. They are here not just to encourage us in the faith but as a testament to what a faith lived out in action for a lifetime can look like. They teach us what faith can be when it has seen battles waged and barriers tumbled and tumultuous change within the church and without. And they are still right here. The faithful hopeful, coming to the word of God, sharing their resources, celebrating the children and reaching out for the bread of life.

So when we look on older members, don't see those who are mired in the past. Don't see those who only long for what once was. Look at our older members and see people who are still here. People who haven't grown discouraged enough to walk away but have hung their faith on something more enduring than worship styles and Sunday school enrollments. Let our own cloud of witnesses be our encouragers and our story tellers. They have persevered and they can teach the rest of us how. Learn from them how to lean in. How to commit fully to the body of Christ. Learn from them how to live as Christ's blessed. Amen.