

Gloria Dei Sermon 11/4/07  
All Saints Sunday  
Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18  
Ephesians 1:11-23  
Luke 6:20-31

Rev. Alan Lindal

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Holy God, may what I say and what we hear be a true reflection of the love you have for your world. Amen.

Today I would like to focus upon the epistle to the church at Ephesus and upon the role of the saints in helping us sustain our faith and our hope. Paul writes a letter of encouragement to the Ephesian Christians. He says that he knows of their love of Christ and of the saints. He prays that they might know the richness of what they have inherited from the saints, people who have gone before, but who have left a shining light and a well-marked path for us all.

This morning I want to share with you that who you see before you in the pulpit is not the only one present. I bring with me this morning a great cloud of witnesses who have shaped me, whose stories have become a part of my faith journey and whose lives continue to inform my living. There is another passage of scripture that I would refer to this morning and that is from the epistle to the Hebrews, in the eleventh chapter. The writer was encouraging a group of Christians who were facing increasing opposition to their faith. By citing the example of the faith of some famous persons in Israel's history, the writer appeals to the listeners to remain faithful. He cites many examples of faithful people, but then he comes down to the last two verses of the eleventh chapter, "What a record all of these have won by their faith! Yet they did not receive what God had promised, because God had decided on an even better plan for us. God's purpose was that only in company with us would they be made complete."

The cloud of witnesses binds us together in a mission and a ministry, a faith and a hope and a love which is far greater than any one of us.. It is the cloud of witnesses which continues to nurture and inspire through time and space. To be in a cloud of witnesses means that that person has passed from life unto death unto life once again. Today I want to share with you about people who accompany me wherever I go. They make guest appearances in my life from time to time. They have helped to make me who I am and who I am yet becoming.

I can't describe my witnesses without starting with my father. He was a hard working beef boner at the old Cudahy Packing Company here in Wichita. He believed in giving a full day's work for a full day's pay. He believed in returning to God at least a tithe of what he received. I remember the family sedan with the four sons in the back seat and the Protestant Princess in the front seat between Mom and Dad. The car did not leave until Dad asked Mom the same question every Sunday morning. "Do you have the check?" He taught me the importance of giving our word to one another. I tell lots of Dad stories and he is never far from my thoughts.

My cloud of witnesses include all of my Sunday School teachers from first through sixth grade. Mrs. Profitt, Lineback, Townsend, Keene, Archer and Gile. Sunday School lessons, like sermons, are a lot like meals prepared at home by our parents. We don't remember them specifically, but we know we have been fed. And so I was. My home church was very instrumental in my spiritual formation.

Lawrence Life was my home church pastor when I entered the ministry. He was a devout man and gave me this encouraging word as I left for seminary in Chicago. He said, "Alan, if you treat every church you serve like it is the best church anywhere, it will be. Churches blossom with encouragement." Don't you love that? He died at age 91, serving as chaplain for the old folks at Friendly Acres Retirement Center in Newton.

My first appointment while in Seminary was at Alden, Illinois, seventy miles northwest of Chicago. Mildred Brandtoft was the treasurer of that small student charge. During the summer of 1972 they had experienced pulpit supply until I arrived on September 1. That Friday evening was the first Administrative Board meeting they had held since the first of May. Mildred proudly stood and gave the offering totals for all thirteen Sundays of the summer. She then read the short list of checks written. She closed her report by announcing with great enthusiasm, "The bank balance as of September 1, is \$1.39." She was thrilled. I was floored. It was the first time the church had been in the black for three years. It was a great introduction to church finances. I learned from Mildred the importance of the glass being half full and not half empty. God's love and grace make us a people of abundance, not scarcity. God provides enough.

From northern Illinois our next stop was Goodland, Kansas. What a place. What a joy. Walker Briney was a bear of a man. Tall and broad, he taught me the lessons of what it means to be the church and how to take care of what is important. While Walker was rich in material things, he was even richer in heart. His vision of God's love would not let the church remain small in mission. The church is larger than any one person or local congregation or even denomination. He was a committed Christian and didn't think there was anything that a group of Christians could not accomplish.

Woodbine and Lyoina was a two-point charge in Dickinson County. Part of the Tri-County parish, the churches had their beginnings in the German Methodist Church. Lyoina is the oldest Methodist Church in the Kansas West Area, founded in 1859. Wes Staatz was the grandchild of the first Anglo child born in Dickinson County. He was in his eighties, was the church sexton and didn't say much, but when he did, it was worth hearing. Wes the first person to clue me in that there are generally two sets of meetings in a church. There is the meeting in the church and then the real meeting is in the parking lot. He seemed to think that that was the case in small churches only. I think it applies to them all.

Merle Brehm was the choir director at Woodbine. He was the only man around his age in the church who was not a first cousin. He and his spouse, Darlene, were the youth sponsors for the two churches. Merle had a vision of faith that reached out to a hurting world. After heart failure following a valve replacement, Merle helped his family say good-bye as we sang Christmas carols in his room at Wesley Hospital. He led us in the Lord's Prayer and within a matter of moments died. A local church knew they had been blessed in many real ways as they celebrated his life in their midst and his life eternal.

Allen Knopp was a cattle and grain farmer in the Woodbine Church, lay member to annual conference and a father of six. He believed that the church at its best was a church giving itself away. Every year the Woodbine Church had a Joash Chest offering in which they would receive over 50 per cent of the annual budget. It was after the fall harvest and an opportunity for the farmers to push the pencil and see what was to be taken to the Lord's house. Some years were better than others. When I heard that some had even borrowed to give to the church and I voiced concern about that, it was Allen who assured me that people were used to borrowing for necessary things. He helped me to define stewardship in ways that I had not even considered.

My next group of saints were at First Church in Wichita. Katherine Dalke was the Church Hostess. She could walk into a room and immediately make everyone feel at ease, even when she had to ask them to move because they were blocking the serving line. She was a small lady with a huge grace. Margaret Selfridge was a spiritual cheerleader. She never met a person that she didn't like or couldn't grow to like.

Wellington was our next witness stop. For six years Helen Voran was my flower lady. She could make funeral flowers last for weeks. She didn't care for gladiolas. They wilted much too early. Helen embodied hospitality in very real ways. She often took a molded jell-o salad to a bereaved family, often arriving before the mortician or the pastor. Given her choice of food, I suspect that

she was a closet Lutheran, but I never accused her of such. I never officiated at a funeral without Helen being present. Sometimes it was the funeral director, myself and Helen. She always said that everyone needs someone at their funeral. Hers was the gift of presence.

The longtime Wellington church member came to plan her only child's funeral. He had died of AIDS after living in Europe and finally in San Francisco. Peggy wanted to use the chapel of the church, because she was afraid that no one would come. I assured her that God's love embraces us all in life and we planned a celebration of his life and included friends from around the world. Over 500 saints filled that church with love and grace. The mother was beaming as she followed the casket out of the church. Her heart overflowed by the outpouring of love.

Derby was home to a very mobile, young congregation. It had more characters than I could keep track of, but one stood out. Gale Peterson always announced his entrance into the church office with "A bright and cheery good morning." He was both. He was also a pain in the side of anyone who was complacent, who was at home with mediocrity, who was ever tempted to say, "Well, it's not the best we can do, but it is good enough." He pushed until the congregation built a much-needed education wing. His was the voice of conscience. His enthusiasm and his optimism were always matched by his actions. He not only talked the talk, but he walked the walk.

Of course, there are many, many people in my cloud of witnesses. There are many in yours. By how we live our faith we are becoming a part of people's lives in such a way that one day we will be a witness in someone's cloud. The scriptures promise us that we will not be perfected on our own, but only in the company of those who will follow us. That gives me hope and purpose for the present and the future. I pray that it gives you hope, too.

It also reminds me that the table around which we gather is much larger than it appears. This is but a foretaste of that great feast when all of creation shall be found within God's loving purpose. Today I thank God on this All Saints Sunday that we are called to love and serve together, each of us surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who have lived in such a way that God's love has been made real. Thanks be to God. In the name of Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen