

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
November 5 & 6, 2011  
John Crosby  
A Legacy of Hope  
Hebrews 11:1, 12:1-3**

My wife Laura gives me a hard time. She says, "It is not a good sign when the pastor's favorite holiday of the year is Halloween. What about Easter? What happened to Christmas?" And I go, "Ohhh, but, honey...." I love Halloween. This year was a great Halloween, wasn't it? We had good weather for once. I always get a rocking chair and set it by the front door. This year I took it up a level. I had a little fire pit out in front. I oooh and awww over every costume and spoil the kids rotten with candy. I love Halloween, but the week is special for me. All Hallows Eve is followed by All Saints Day, the next day, and then All Souls Day if you are Catholic or Episcopalian. This is a wonderful week to celebrate the richness of life and death and life after life, and too often we don't give it its due.

What I'd like to do is to ask you to help me get a broader view of this week by pulling out the Bibles that are in front of you. Would you take the pew Bibles out, please? Turn to Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12. It starts on page 1,793 or so, toward the end. Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12. In the ancient world All Hallows Eve is conceived to ward off the evil spirits who leave the graves and come back to haunt and terrify. People would put on masks so they wouldn't be known. As a counterpoint, actually, Christians moved All Saints Day from some time in the spring near All Hallows Eve, the druid feast, so that they could say, "Yes, the dead rise but they have no power. There is only the God of life." We see this not because the graves open, not because we are afraid of ghosts but by faith. They began that with Hebrews, chapter 11. Remember, we talked about spending the whole of this autumn studying three words: faith that moves us through life, hope that helps us endure the worst, and love that is the strongest because it shows up. As we close the gun lap on hope, we would like to talk about how it was rooted in faith. That's how chapter 11 starts.

<sup>1</sup> Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. <sup>2</sup> This is what the ancients were commended for. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Then he starts what is called the roll call of faith, looking at all the Old Testament heroes, whose lives were going in one direction and then were moved in a different direction by faith. Verse 13,

<sup>13</sup> All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth....<sup>16</sup> Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Again, more of the roll call of faith, more examples of faith, and then verse 38. If this is not underlined in your Bible, would you underline it? If it is underlined, would you circle it? Verse 38,

<sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them....

<sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup> God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

So now we are ready for our verse for today, Hebrews 12:1. Again, if it is not underlined, underline it.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore...

In view of all that we have just read about the roll call of faith,

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

I'd ask you to hold your Bibles open to that page because I want to underline three more things that come from a seminar I took about five years after I got into this business. I went to a preaching seminar to learn how to be a better communicator. The famous preacher who was giving the seminar said, "I do not preach so that my people will know more. I preach so that God will change their lives, and the only way that God will change anybody's life is not for you to stand up and inform them but for you to express the problem you're solving." There needs to be a problem that Scripture addresses in your life and in my life to which God alone brings the answer.

So what is the problem that God is trying to resolve for the people in the Letter to the Hebrews, and how does that affect us? For the folks who have just heard this stirring roll call of the Ancient of Days, the problem for them is danger. They are in danger. They are being surrounded by things that hinder them, and they are threatened by the sin that so easily entangles them that may knock these new followers of Christ out of the race of faith. The clue that I want you to underline is just down the way in Hebrews 12:3.

<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

They are in danger of growing weary, losing heart. Faith is great on Sunday, but by Thursday, wow!

<sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The example of Jesus was that He shed His blood. They often had to do that. For them it was an imminent possibility. Persecution was coming to the Empire. They had heard of the terrible

things happening in Jerusalem, and the writer of the Hebrews was saying, “It may yet come to a synagogue near you, to a church in your midst. Be ready.” So he says in verse 12,

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

They are losing power. Strengthen your feeble arms and your weak knees. Get up and run again.

<sup>13</sup> “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Those are their problems. What would ours be? What would be equivalent of that which so easily entangles and the sin that trips us up from running the race? Could I just suggest three quick ones? The first, actually, comes out of the headlines these last couple of weeks. We have heard about Steven Jobs and Al Davis and just this week, Andy Rooney. In our culture they are vivid reminders of the denial of death. Our culture is a death-denying culture where death intrudes, and we are always surprised. I saw CNN yesterday. I was out groaning through my workout, and the young lady is announcing, “Here is breaking news. Andy Rooney has died.” The guy is 92, but it is like this is a shock. I think that we fear death. We push dying away from us into the old people’s home and don’t know how to handle it when it comes to us. This is so different from the experience of the early followers of Christ, who lived in a world where death was all around them and violent, and life was short and people lived in terrible fear.

The early followers of Christ found something new that allowed them, to coin a phrase, they said to one another, “Let us prepare for the good death by living the good life.” All Saints Day is a byproduct of people who are saying death is not the end of the rope. Our culture forgets that too often. So does our church. In the same way, our culture so often is brought right into our churches with a bunch of people including me who can root for the wrong things, and this place, this building, is home when it’s not. The writer of the Hebrews has reminded them, “You are pilgrims and sojourners, strangers to the land, walking to a different place,” but with the riches of our country, the materialism and the individualism, they get surprised again and again when evil shows its face or when pain interrupts. It seems like something is wrong with the normal of life when the Gospel says the normal life is not normal at all. You’re on a pilgrimage through enemy territory on your way to some place better. Do not get too comfortable here. All Saints Day is a reminder of that, tougher, frankly, in pockets of the earth, but we are doing quite well, thank you.

That leads to the third thing that would be a problem for the early followers of Christ and is so often a problem for us. We live just like our friends and our friends, frankly, too often live lives in the house of fear. Henri Nouwen talks about the choice that all of us have to live in the house of love or to live in the house of fear. Too many of us are living in the house of fear, wondering what will go wrong next. What can steal the joy of your tomorrow so it poisons today. You have taken a whack somewhere, a death, a lost job, a broken love, and now you live in the house of fear. What the apostle is telling the Hebrew church is that when you lose hope, you lose the ability to peruse the fruit of joy. Joy, even in the midst of tough times. Joy, the fruit of God that can be shared with others. It seems to me, that if somebody were to ask, what entangles you, what stops you from running the race of faith, I would look at what I think about God. Whether I am living for here and now or on my way to somewhere else. Whether you are living in the house of fear or the house of love. What solutions does the apostle offer? Again, it is sort of a strange thing. He looks back and says, “Look back at history and look ahead. Fix your eyes

upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith and run after Him. Follow Him.” I guess that since it is All Saints Day, I want to talk about the looking back part because he just spent a whole chapter looking back at those who have tried to live lives of faith before us, before you.

I thought of a friend of mine, a sociologist. His name is Anthony Campolo, Tony Campolo, a sociologist who recognized that the group of people that is the fastest growing in our population is between the ages of 95 and 103. Percentagewise we are growing old very fast. It seems a boring statistic to me, but I take much more comfort from it now than I used to. Campolo sends his grad students out, and they interview over 300 people in Pennsylvania and New York who are over 100 years old. One of the questions they asked these centenarians who had seen so much of life was, “If you were going to do life over, how would you live differently?”

The grad students lumped the answers into several buckets, and three answers emerged on top. The people over 100 years of age said that if they were to do it over again, they would laugh more. They said, “We worried about the wrong thing way too much.” Remember, these are the people who went through the Great Depression and the Second World War and the Cold War. They said, “Oh, we focused on the headlines way too much. We want to laugh more and have more joy. We worried about the wrong things, and we missed the best.” They said, “We would laugh more.” And the second thing they said was, “We would risk more.” They would take more risks. Looking back from 100 years old, they said, “Oh, you know, I played it safe way too often. Look what I missed. I would have tried *this*. I would have gone for *that*,” and they believed their lives would have been richer. “I would laugh more. I would risk more.” And finally they said, “If I were to do it over, I would do more that lasts beyond my time. I would do more that lasts beyond my dying.” They would be very much like the roll call of faith. They would be the people who experienced a different kind of life, who took the risks in Hebrews 11, and because of that, they saw things and laughed at things that many of their peers never acknowledged. And they would do more things that lasted beyond their time. We still talk about those people.

Here is what I would like you to do this All Saints weekend. I would like you to think about who would be heroes of faith for you. Who is someone you can think of who taught you life lessons including something about God? Can you think of anybody older than you who taught you something about the reality of love or life or faith? Stop just for a second and think. If you can think of somebody who might not be called a hero in newspaper terms but someone who has influenced your life or your love or your faith in a positive way, just raise your hand. You are a Presbyterian. You don't have to raise it high. Just raise your hand. Okay, most of us are thinking of somebody.

As I was preparing this I thought of two people. The first one was a man who has been dead for about five years now. His name is John Dellenback. There was a big obit for him in the West Coast papers because he had been a congressperson. He had owned several radio stations, was a successful lawyer, turned the radio stations into TV stations, went into Congress, got bounced out of Congress because he was a Republican. The Nixon impeachment thing knocked him out of office. Then he was appointed by a Democrat to be the head of the Peace Corp and ran the Peace Corp. Then after that Mr. Dellenback decided to become the president of what is now called the Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities and saw the quadrupling of that organization in his ten years. He then retired, and in his retirement became the chairperson of World Vision, the organization we know. He was the chair immediately before my coming on the board, so we never served together, but I had known him when he was the

head of the Peace Corp in Washington, D.C., and he had a powerful influence on me and many other young people.

Anyway, all this is to say the guy is 83 years old and celebrates his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. The clan gathers in Oregon, four kids, 15 grandkids, his wife, Mary Jane. They all bring the presents, and he laughs and goes, "Guys, I'm 83. Why are you giving me presents, really?" and he pulls out of his pocket 19 envelopes. Inside each of the 19 envelopes, he has put \$84. He is 83, and he has put \$84 in each of the envelopes. He said, "Here is what I want you to do. What I want you to do is take this \$84 and invest it to change the lives of the poor. Can you do that? He gives an envelope to each of the grandkids, "This is for you." He gives one to each of the kids, "Here is for you. This is your birthday present to me. Do something creative. Do something you wouldn't do otherwise with this money, and then your gift to me is to tell me about it."

The kids loved it. They thought it was a great idea. Just like crazy grandpa to come up with some idea like this. They said, "Oh, this is great. Next year when you are 84, we'll sit around and we'll tell you all the things we did with the money." He said, "Well, you know, I'm 83. Let's make it Christmas." So they agreed on that and, of course, in the economy of heaven, he got sick and didn't make it to Christmas. I heard about the funeral and could not go, but a friend of mine went and said that the funeral was as you would imagine. The Vice President was there and several senators who spoke about John's life and legacy. Then toward the end, Mary Jane, his wife is escorted to the front by the eldest son. She said, "Let me tell you about John's last birthday," and she told this little story. She said, "We never got to tell John what we did with the money, so we thought we would like to tell you," and she had the kids and grandkids get up, the 19 of them. They just passed the microphone. They said, "Grandpa, do you know what I did?" "Grandpa, do you know what I did?" "Grandpa, do you know what happened?" And the legacy of the man who lived not to make more money, but to give more money touched not just his children and his grandchildren but everybody in the room that day. That is the legacy of faith. But, you know, that is for rich people. That is for famous people. Those are the neat stories the preacher tells, right?

I can share with you that when I raised my hand, I wasn't thinking about John. I love John Dellenback, but I was thinking of my father-in-law, Don Johansen, whose burden in life is me. About six years ago Don and Jan celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We arranged for our family, the whole clan, to meet out at Big Sky. We did a little thing like the Dellenbacks did where each of the grandkids and each of the kids stood up and said, "Oh, you know what I love about you guys?" All this. We went around and had a great time. Don stood up. Don is not going to have a big funeral. He is nobody famous. He was middle-level management in Illinois Bell, took early retirement, hated to speak in public. He stood up, but he wasn't in public. He was in front of his family. He said, "Oh, you guys, this is so special for me and Jan. You know," he says and he looks at each one of the grandkids and each one of the kids, and he says, "every morning when I wake up, I go through my Bible, and I pray for every one of you by name. Every day. And I thank God for you." From the back where his son-in-law, the pastor, is sitting, you hear this, "Oh, holy crap." Because his son-in-law, the pastor, at that point probably couldn't say that every day he prayed for even just his children. But for the last six years he has. For his children and for the people around him and for many of you. And the legacy of my father-in-law, who will never be remembered, will be remembered in heaven.

So what I'd like you to do, if you have thought about that hero of the faith and they are still alive, I'd like you to send them a note. And at the very least, and this is not a small thing, you could

commit today to praying for one person, one person younger than you are. If you are young, there is somebody younger, and send them a note, telling them you are praying for them because they are valuable in the sight of God. They are valuable enough to be prayed for. That is an All Saints blessing, and God will bless you all as He has blessed me through the saints. Let's pray.

Therefore, Lord, You said *therefore* since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, people who have gone before us famously and infamously and totally unnoticed. *Therefore*, since we are surrounded by these people, the young ones and the old ones, we hear them cheering in the stands sometimes, *therefore*, help us to run the race of faith in our generation, in our time, with hope that will help us endure and love that will show up and faith that is a gift in You. As we think about the saints, we think about this young man who tried to take his life last night, someone who lost his job a couple of years ago, and all these cards mentioning folks in our community, in our church here, whose bodies hurt. We ask You in the sight of all the witnesses of heaven to give us strength to run the next leg of the race today and tomorrow.

Lord Jesus, the people at the feast table of heaven, they look down at this bread and this juice, and they smile because they are eating the feast of heaven with You. As we take this bread and we break it, they remember the Savior who came for them at their death and said, "Come." As we take this juice, they remember the Savior who forgave their sins and washed them clean and does the same for us to give us hope and love for the run. I pray that You will do that in the presence of all the saints, in the hope of all the glory to come. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*