

FOR ALL THE SAINTS
Joshua 3:7-17
Psalm 107:1-7
I Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 5:1-12

Do you remember those early days of Covid, when we were in lockdown, and we were all trying to figure out what to do with our time? Well, I decided to use those days at home to work on family photographs. The ones I particularly wanted to organize were the old photos, the pictures passed down from my parents and grandparents. One that stood out was a picture taken of the front steps leading up to the sanctuary of the church in which I grew up, though the picture was taken long before I came along. Those steps were filled with members of that congregation, including my mother and her family. She is standing at the bottom step with her younger brother alongside. I would guess she was about 9 or 10. My grandparents, young and smiling, stand further up the steps. But there are other faces I recognize as well. Near my mother was another child, Edgar Ritchie, whom I knew as the father of three and a leader of the church. Near the top step is Ray Wobbe, who served as Boy Scout leader with my dad. Judge Schmidt is there, too, though I doubt that he was a judge yet. For as long as I could remember, he taught my grandparents' Sunday School class. Miss Pell stands near him with a perfect attendance pin attached to the collar of her coat. Over the years, she accumulated multiple bars to attach to her pin, representing so many years of perfect church attendance, that she could have worn them as a necklace. There was also a pair of sisters, about my mother's age, whom I knew as members of my mother's circle, a group of church women who met every month for Bible study, fellowship and mission projects, such as collecting clothes to send to the poor who lived in the mountains of Kentucky. Standing at the very top of the steps, is a man whom I never knew, Reverend Prather, but whose reputation was passed on to me.

I tell you about that picture and those people because they came to mind when I read the story from Joshua we just heard. It is a strange little story, with echoes of when the Hebrew people crossed the Red Sea as they escaped slavery in Egypt. On that occasion, they crossed the dry seabed to freedom and into the wilderness. For forty years they wandered in the wilderness following the lead of God's pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, until they reached the edge of the land that God had promised their ancestor, Abraham. However, between them and that promise, flowed the Jordan River. As the Jordan makes its way from Mount Hermon to the Dead Sea, it falls over 10,000 feet, making it one of the fastest flowing rivers of its size in the world. As the Hebrew people waited on its banks, it was not only fast-moving, but also at its spring flood stage. It was into that torrent that the representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel were told to go. Imagine the act of faith it must have been when the first man dipped his big toe into the Jordan, but as the twelve walked into the churning water, the flow halted and the southbound waters piled up in a heap behind them. The riverbed went dry, all the way to the Dead Sea. There they stood while the people crossed the Jordan on dry ground. Of course, it was not the twelve men who held back the water, but God. Just as it had been back at the Red Sea, so, here too, God acted on behalf of the people, but the ones who stood before the teeming waters had to trust that God would do so. In the midst of threat and chaos, they acted on and witnessed to their belief that God was trustworthy, and did so for the sake of those who passed by them to the other side of the river.

This account reminded me of that old Sunday School picture, because I know that there were some people in that picture who acted like the twelve to hold back the floods of despair and fear that threatened to sweep away some of the others in the picture. That picture was taken at about the time of the stock market crash of 1929, which led to the Great Depression. I know of at least person in the picture who lost his job, faced great debt and nearly lost his home during that time. As he slipped into despondency, it was someone from the church, someone in that picture, who made regular visits, just to be by his side, holding back the waters of despair and witnessing to God's faithfulness.

The people in that picture are among the saints that I remember and give thanks for today. You won't find them in Butler's *The Stories of the Saints*; no churches are named for them; no medals bear their images. They are just ordinary people, and yet, looking back, I learned about commitment, faithfulness and community from them. They demonstrated in quiet, unassuming ways what it means to live out one's faith. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber tweaks that definition by saying, the quality of sainthood is located not in "our ability to be saintly, but rather God's ability to work through sinners."ⁱ

I think that is what Jesus was talking about in the Beatitudes. It has been said that if the Sermon on the Mount is the constitution of the church, then the Beatitudes are its preamble.ⁱⁱ They describe the foundation of every custom and the aim of every practice of the community that Jesus called into being. And in so doing the Beatitudes describe the people who make up that community, the saints who are Christ's church. If you take a minute and look at the list, you will not find the self-sufficient, the assertive or the power brokers. You will not find the rich or beautiful, the happy, strong or well-liked. Rather they are ordinary people—poor, mourning, gentle, merciful, peacemaking, reviled people. People who are not trying to win God's blessing, but who are blessed out of God's love and grace. They are people whose manner of living is based on the knowledge of God's blessing, not in order to somehow earn it. These are the people who trust the love of God enough to step into the swirling waters on behalf of a brother or sister who is threatened to be overcome. Think of those people you have known who came to sit by your side or wrote a note, packed lunch for your kids or brought you flowers, who prayed when you could no longer find words because it felt like you might be going under for the third time and by their simple act allowed you to discover there was dry land on which to walk. They are the ones who, by their presence, helped you to know that God was with you. They are the saints we remember and celebrate today, alongside the ones whose names are on churches and faces are displayed in stained glass.

After the last of the Hebrew people finished safely crossing the Jordan, at God's instruction, Joshua commanded that two piles of twelve stones each be erected. One cairn was set up at the water's edge and the other stood in the middle of the Jordan as a memorial forever.ⁱⁱⁱ In later years, when the children asked about the piles of stones, the story of crossing the river was to be told, the story of God's provision and the people's trust was to be repeated. As the people entered the Promised Land and began to build their lives there, they were commanded to remember, because memory of the past gives direction and encouragement for the future. If God was faithful then, surely God will be faithful now.

Steph has been asking us to think about hope during Wednesdays at the Well. One evening she asked us to write down some of the things that give us hope. I noticed that the word children showed up a lot, because, of course, they are the future. We hope for a better world for them and we hope that they will be able to create a better world. But we also need our ancestors of the faith to provide a foundation for hope. Pastor Katherine Pershey tells a story of her congregation's history from the mid-

1930's when they could no longer afford the mortgage on their church building. They uninstalled the telephone and slashed the pastor's salary in half and reduced the church budget by two-thirds. Still they increased two line items: mission, because they knew their neighbors were in more need than ever before, and education, because they believed in the importance of the Christian formation of their children even in a time of scarcity.^{iv} Those people of another century, planted the seeds of hope for that congregation in this century. They stood firm against the swelling tide of the Depression and their witness then, believing that the living God was with them, like the witness of the saints we knew and remember, is a gift to us now as we face the turbulence of our generation.

In a few moments we will gather at Christ's table and we will hear words much like those spoken to Joshua and the Hebrew people when told by God to put the stone cairns in place—"Do this!" God said. "Remember!" God said. "I will be with you!" God said. When we gather at the table, we will remember—remember Jesus, his sacrifice and his promise and we will remember all those saints through the generations who trusted God's promise to be with them. Those saints, those blessed ones, gather at the table with us. Through them, may we be reminded of the great company of God's people of every age of which we are a part.

ⁱ Cited by Valerie Weaver-Zercher 's review of *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, by Nadia Bolz-Weber, in *Christian Century*, October 14, 2015, p. 55.

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p.46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joshua 4:1-7.

^{iv} Katherine Willis Pershey, "Prayers Rising Past the Immanent Frame," *The Christian Century*, September 2023, p.63.