

“The Community of Our Saints”
Hebrews 11-12, selected verses
November 2, 2008
All Saints Sunday

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For the last five weeks, we’ve explored our “Moral Compass” – the Global Positioning System God hard-wired in us to help us find our way. Especially in times like ours – when winds of uncertainty blow fierce, and gusts toss our economy to and fro, and the flattened world offers so little protection from the storm – especially in these times, our compass guides us to security. The five moral compass points are the same in every human heart: Purity; fairness; authority; not harming others; and community.

Although our moral compass is in-born, the way we read the compass is learned ... and, just like languages, every culture teaches it differently. For instance, everyone has a compass point of fairness. But as Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker points out, the equal opportunity we see as fair is incomprehensible in many cultures, who ask, “What heartless creep would favor a perfect stranger over his own brother?” (Steven Pinker, Harvard College Professor and Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, “The Moral Instinct,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 2008).

We may be born with a moral compass, but the only way we learn how to read it is in community. And the most important community -- above political party, peer group, or even family – above all, our Christian community is our most crucial guide, if we are to find our way. For the next four weeks we’ll explore what Christ’s community teaches us about finding direction in challenging times. The first place we’ll start is with the communion of saints: the community of faith that has trod this path before.

The saints of the past: we may not think of them often, or even think they offer much for our challenging times. But research begs to differ. Though it’s important to appreciate the present – to stop and smell the roses and live in the moment ... and though it’s important to look to the future with hope – to work hard and set goals – awareness of the present and future aren’t the most

important predictors of a satisfying, meaningful life. Instead, a new book – *The Time Paradox* – chronicles extensive studies showing that our most important orientation toward time is a positive appreciation of the past. The more we savor memories of relationships and let go of grudges; the more we connect to our roots and let go of our forebears' failings; the more we treasure their legacy and let go of the myth that we are self-made: the stronger our sense of a positive past, the better grounded and centered we will be. In fact, the more crazy and stressful our circumstances, the more the past helps us navigate our way (Philip Zimbardo, *The Time Paradox* (NY: Free Press, 2008), pp. 296-7 and elsewhere).

And this is exactly the direction that the ancient writer of Hebrews points us. Though the timing of his letter isn't known, the circumstances are clear: the present is extremely stressful, and the future isn't looking much better. He's writing to people whose faith is weakening, whose property has been lost, and who face even persecution for their integrity (cf. Introduction to the letter to the Hebrews, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 316)). How does he encourage his church in such stressful times? Instead of reading the crystal ball to look forward, or trying to pretty-up their dismal present, the writer of the Hebrews does something counter-intuitive: he invites us to look backwards. He reviews the litany of Scripture to see how our ancestors in the community of faith coped before. Their moral compass – of courage and strength – points us through our stressful times; and more than that – they help us see what we are made of.

He points to Abraham, who was called from his settled existence and didn't know where he was going. Time after time he was tested and challenged: he visited the Promised Land but couldn't settle in it; he was given a wife, Sarah, but she was barren. And though he was not perfect, Abraham kept looking back to the promise of God; kept engaging with God, even bargaining with God, and he stayed faithful.

And he points us to Moses, who was called to stand up to Pharaoh and lead his people to freedom. His life was threatened; his people were afraid;

and when they built the golden calf, he thought the whole project was over. And though he wasn't perfect, Moses kept turning to God, kept listening to God, in order for his people to become the faithful community they were meant to be.

And he points us to David, who was called to draw the tribes of Israel together as one nation. He faced down the giant Goliath; his enemies constantly conspired to kill him. He was hardly perfect -- his affair with Bathsheba nearly brought down his kingdom -- but he became a brilliant strategist on God's behalf, establishing the capital city of Jerusalem, uniting deeply divided clans in one cause for the common good, all for the sake of God's glory.

And all of this matters because this is the stuff we are made of; and this is how we find our way forward: to keep engaging with God, to keep relying on God's promises; to keep listening to God; to keep trying to be a faithful community; to keep uniting our own divided clans for God's greater will for the common good; to keep seeking God's glory.

We look to the past not for the sake of ancient history, but for the courage and guidance we need right now. And it's not just the Biblical saints who inspire us. As we approach the 150th anniversary of our congregation, we're reminded of the saints who surround us in this very place. One of the greatest is the Rev. Dr. James McClure, whose granddaughter Margaret Hart and her family are active members to this day. I turn to him as my role-model and guide. Called here in the late 1800s, in the upheaval of Industrialization, Dr. McClure forged a fractious, successful and head-strong congregation into an amazing force of philanthropy and social progress. He did it not by brow-beating or cajoling them, but by stirring sermons and disciplined religious education, transforming wealthy men and women into generous stewards for God.

And I think of Sarah Rhea, who worked with Dr. McClure for many years. A graduate of Mt. Holyoke -- whose slogan was "Live for God, and do

something” – Mrs. Rhea married a missionary, went to Persia, bore four children, buried one of them, lost her husband, and returned to America to become an agent of the Presbyterian board of home missions. She was assigned to the Northwest ... that is, to Chicago – and in 1873, here in Lake Forest, she began to set this church’s passion for mission on fire. She founded the children’s missionary society, Steady Streams, and inspired enormous donations by Abby Farwell Ferry and Martha Reid to start hospitals in Persia. Presbyterian mission in the Middle East is strong today thanks to one member of our church who connected the movers and shakers of Chicago to the desperate needs of the larger world. Dr. McClure and Mrs. Rhea – they no doubt were not perfect. And yet we remember that this is the stuff we are made of; and this is how we find our way forward: in the midst of staggering change, inspiring worship and disciplined faith formation; and a mission that seeks to live for God and do something, something that in the end matters (I am indebted to Arthur Miller for this information from his unpublished manuscript in preparation for the 150th Anniversary book, First Presbyterian Church, Lake Forest).

The saints of the past – from Scripture, from this church – they inspire us. And all of us, every one of us, also have personal saints to whom we look back, who go before us in courage and strength. In a few minutes, we will celebrate communion, and we will be surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses – the communion of saints who have died, and are raised, and who celebrate the joyful feast in the Kingdom of God. And then, after we have broken bread together, we will name once more the people of our congregation who have died this year. One of them will be my own mother. My mother, who not only gave me life – who also taught me through her struggles and courage how to be fiercely honest, and what it means to have a generous heart, and how amazing life is when you quiet down enough to notice the littlest things, the songs of the birds and the flutter of the trees, the too-easily-missed exquisite handiwork of God. And I will look back and remember, as I dearly need to do, that this is the stuff I am made of, and this is how I will find my way forward in whatever challenges I face ahead.

Who is it that stands behind you, who is it in your recent or long-shadowed past, who makes you who you are? Who is it in our Scripture and our church, in your history and your gene-pool, who inspires and informs you, who has given you the substance of your being? It is not for their sake but for yours that I invite you to remember. To clarify your vision and illuminate the path ahead of you, and most of all, to fill you with courage and strength to live with conviction because this is what you are made of.

I felt this way last weekend. Last Sunday our family worshiped in Rockefeller Chapel – we were in Hyde Park for our first Parents’ Weekend at University of Chicago. Now if you’ve been in Rockefeller Chapel you know how massive it is: 265’ long, with a seating capacity of 1700 people. Last Sunday there were perhaps 150 people worshiping, although that might be a generous estimate. Fortunately they herded us all toward the front so that at least there were a few of us in each pew. The assistant Dean of the Chapel started us out with her strong voice, and we shared in the Call to Worship. Fortunately, the acoustics are amazing and we didn’t seem so small. But when it came time for the opening hymn – even though it was happily familiar – well, our voices seemed to fly into the ether. We gamely tried, but the beautiful but very, very large organ overwhelmed us and we felt, well, puny in our efforts.

And then ... and then, we heard the voices behind us. The choir – small in number but mighty in strength – the choir proceeded up the center aisle. The voices were steady, and strong, and confident. And as they grew closer an amazing thing happened. Our singing – the congregation’s singing – grew stronger. We stood a little straighter. Our voices grew a little louder. And I thought: this is what it’s like to have voices behind you – a choir of singers behind you – leaders, strong leaders who have walked the aisle of faith before, whose conviction is just what you need. And I believe this to be true: we are surrounded by a choir of voices, even when we do not see them. Listen for their voices: the cloud of witnesses surrounds us; the communion of saints is coming from behind us, urging us to sing with boldness and with courage even now. Amen.