

THOSE WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US

Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18
Ephesians 1: 11-23

Faith Community
November 4, 2001

Introduction

I never met my grandfather. He was a farmer in southeast Ohio, and he died before I was born. I've heard a lot about him.

He was very active in his church – for good reason, it was a church he was primarily responsible for starting. The Sand Hill Presbyterian Church came into existence mostly because he pulled the people together, talked with the Presbytery about it, found a preacher, and began the worship services. He, of course, served on the Session. (I've sometimes wondered what he would think of his grandson who started a new church up there in Michigan)

He was a farmer, and an amazing one at that. When my dad retired he gave me his dad's leather bound volumes of John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. His father had not only read them, he studied them.

I doubt if any of you have ever attempted reading Calvin's Institutes, unless you are clergy, but it is a tome to read. It is profound theology has been foundational, especially for Presbyterians. There are a lot of ministers who haven't read Calvin's Institutes, but my grandfather read it and studied it.

My grandfather had four children – three girls and one boy. The boy, my father, became a Presbyterian minister, and his three sisters married Presbyterian ministers. The faith of my grandfather and grandmother had an enormous effect on the lives of their children and their children's children.

People of faith, who you have never met, can have a profound and lasting effect on each of us.

I

As we look at the saints of the church, not all of them are well known, or even for that matter, canonized. Some of the saints are people we know well, some are people we have never met, but who have influenced us in surprising ways. They are the people who have lived their faith in good times and bad, in public and in private ways.

Some of the saints are the early Christians who had to choose between being faithful to Christ and facing the lions. Lots of Christians chose to be eaten alive rather than to deny their faith.

For many Christians, faith has meant persecution, the threat of death, suffering. For some it meant living in a safe time and place but making extraordinary efforts to help other people.

These saints have influenced our lives.

II

Our Christian faith is never just our own. We are influenced by people all around us – parents, pastors, and teachers are examples who show us with their lives what faith is supposed to be about. The people who we know touch us, move us, sometimes they turn us around. Our faith is never just between God and us; people alive and dead influence us all the time.

I remember when I was ordained into the ministry. I asked my favorite teacher to preach at that service. (He is now a famous professor at Vanderbilt University.) As I sat at the front of the sanctuary looking out at the people gathered there, I could see in one place so many of the saints who had influenced my life – my parents and family, Sunday school teachers I who had taught me over the years, professors I had learned from, friends who had listened and offered their help.

There in that room were some of the dozens of people who had influenced who I was, what I had become, and what I believed. Since that day, of course, there have been hundreds of other influential people who have affected my life and ministry.

III

But I also realized that I have been influenced by lots of people I have never seen. All of us are changed, molded, by people we have never met, people we don't know, we can't talk to, and who aren't alive.

My Grandfather has been a big influence in my life, but I never saw him or talked with him. He has affected me directly by what I have learned about him and indirectly by the influence he has had on my parents and aunts, uncles, and cousins.

We are also affected by the people whose writings we read - those who we learn from who have long since died. Their influence lives on. Some have lived centuries ago, in lands that are nothing like ours, but what they have written molds and changes us in our lives today.

Much of what I believe has been affected by John Calvin and John Knox, often in ways I never realized. They lived in the 16th century in Switzerland and Scotland.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has had a profound impact on my life, and he lived in Germany during World War II. He was executed by the Nazis nine months before I was born.

But what he wrote, and how he lived his life has been very influential in my life and in the lives of thousands of other people. Writers and thinkers - people from across this country and around the world – have helped form the faith I hold.

All of us are like that. We are indebted to the saints, living and dead, who have helped us in our faith.

IV

No one's faith is purely their own. All of us are influenced, changed, molded, guided by people of faith who have impressed us and who have helped us. We never have a faith that is only between God and us. God uses all kinds of people to help us learn and grow in our faith. Some are contemporary, some are ancient; some are aware that they make a difference for us, most are not. All of us are touched by others who make a difference.

And, of course, each of us is an influence on other people as well. Some people look to us to understand what it means to be Christian. There are those around us, whom we might not even be aware of, who are being affected by how we live our faith, and what we teach with our lives. That is an awesome responsibility and a wonderful gift.

Conclusion

Who has influenced you? As you think about the saints in your life, who has made a difference for you? Who has been a mentor to you in your faith? Some of them are still alive; some have gone on. Some you have known well, some you've never met or talked to. How did they affect your life?

How was God working in their lives that made a difference for you? Take some time this morning to thank God for those marvelous people who have helped you in your faith.

Amen