

“The Communion of Saints – Hymn Sing Sunday”

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There’s something about a fine old hymn
That can stir the heart of a man;
That can reach the goal of his inmost soul
Such as no mere preaching can.

It’s more than the tune of the song he sings
And it’s more than the poet’s rhyme –
It’s the Spirit of God working through these things
That gives them their power sublime!

So we thank Thee Lord, for the fine old hymns;
May we use them again and again
As we seek to save from a hopeless grave
The souls of our fellow men!

Words written by an unknown author.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 39-40, 12:1-2

It's hard to believe, but our summer study of the Apostle's Creed is nearing an end. All summer long, we have studied these words of our faith and been challenged to consider how we bring them to life through the way we live out our faith. I don't know about you, but as we have journeyed through this study I have experienced an array of responses ranging from encouraging joy to helpless defeat. There have been moments in our study that have given me confidence that I am doing all that I can, but also moments in which I feel there is no way I could ever do enough. This morning though, we pause to remember that we are not alone in this effort. We do not journey through this faithful discipleship in isolation, but rather we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Our passage from Hebrews opens with the mention of this cloud of witnesses by naming those saints of our ancient faith. Verse 3, although not read out loud, goes on to name how God has come alive through the great leaders of our faith such as Abraham and Moses reminding us of how they lived out their faith even in the gravest of situations - but the passage doesn't end there - because then in Hebrews 12 our text calls goes a step further by inviting *us to join in the cloud of witnesses by how we live out our faith.*

When we affirm in our creed that we believe in the communion of saints – we are stating that the saints of ancestors, those influential leaders who have gone before us, are more than just great figures in history – they are a part of the body of Christ, they are a part of us. Their experiences have shaped our faith and we continue to grow by their example. But again, the story doesn't end there because the generations that are also a part of the body of Christ.... and they will learn from us – by how we lived out our faith. Our text, and the voices of our saints, call us to live our own story. We are called to come alive in our faith, to walk with courage, and to live for the larger body of Christ.

The struggle to be faithful disciples is a struggle experienced throughout our human history, we know from reading the words preserved in our ancient texts, music, and poetry. Surely there is no greater example of this than those fine old hymns mentioned by the author of our poem. There is just something about those fine old hymns. Well, you know the ones... They are the hymns that we sang standing next to our grandparents in church, the hymns that taught us how to read music in children's choir, the hymns that continue to appear in each passing generation of our hymnals, and the hymns we long for in seasons of doubt and despair. They are the hymns that lead the elderly to recite word for word despite dementia and Alzheimer's and the same hymns that unite denominations and generations. Yes, there is something... something about an old hymn that leaves us with an undeniable stirring of the spirit and a deep desire for... God.

The power of these hymns is more than the tune or even the lyrics... it's an unexplainable moving of the Spirit – a feeling, an impulse, a reaction that happens when we sing these familiar words. Because embedded deep within these hymns.... is a story. A story of how God's presence has been revealed through the experiences of Christians throughout the generations. Hymns are living capsules of how God has been revealed through the best – and worst of times in our human history.

Kenneth Osbeck shares of these stories in his book *101 Hymn Stories*.... He shares of stories like that of John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace*. As many of you may be familiar, Newton's painful life experiences are what influenced his writing of this timeless hymn. He left school when he was young and joined his father's ship and began his life as a seaman. He later became a captain of his very own ship – a slave ship. Osbeck reminds us that as one might imagine, those years of selling and transporting black slaves to the plantations in the West Indies and America

was a cruel and vicious way of life that took its toll on Newton. In the spring of 1748 Newton experienced a powerful moment of conversion and became a Christian accepting Christ as his Savior. After this conversion he started to feel a deep tension between his work as a captain of a slave ship and what he read in scripture... this tension eventually led to him becoming a crusader against slavery. (Osbeck, 6). He became an ordained pastor and devoted his life to preaching and writing hymns – which is where we get Amazing Grace.... how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me... was once was lost but now I'm found was blind but now I see...

Osbeck also tells of the story of Martin Rinkart in his writing of Now Thank we All Our God? What is often sung as a joyful song actually arose out of the tragedy found in the Thirty Years' War. Rinkart was called to a church in Eilenberg which was a walled city that became an overcrowded refuge during the war years. During this time they experienced waves of plague and famine leaving staggering amounts of death and grief. Rinkart performed between 40-50 funerals a day. His home became a place of refuge and he often sacrificed food and clothing for his own family for the sake of others who needed refuge. During the final years of the war, Eilenburg was overrun by invading armies. There came a demand of a large tribute payment and Rinkart interceded with leaders in attempt to reduce the amount of the tribute. It is said that Rinkart, got down onto his knees, and led his parishioners in prayer and the singing of this familiar hymn.... moving the Swedish commander to lower the demands of the tribute payment. This context brings such deeper meaning to the words of this sacred hymn.

And finally... Osbeck reminds us that we cannot study the communion of the saints without pausing to remember the story of Samuel Stone who wrote The Church's One Foundation. Stone was deeply troubled by the turmoil within the Anglican Church over a book by Bishop Colenso in which he attacked the historical accuracy of the Pentateuch. This argument

was then disputed by another Anglican leader Bishop Gray. Soon this dispute between these two leaders became widespread throughout the entire Anglican Church. This hymn written by Stone highlighted his deeply held conviction that the unity of the Church must rest solely with recognition of the Lordship of Christ as its head not on views and interpretations of men. This hymn, was born from the theological grounding in our creed of the holy catholic church; the communion of the saints.

Each of these stories that come through in the words of our hymns represent a specific historical context, an experience of the authors that inspired the words behind these old faithful hymns. And yet, centuries later, and we can still find relevant comparisons and theological truths for our own current context. Perhaps we have never been the captain of a slave ship – but surely we can find examples of how our faith should influence our understanding of how we are to LIVE OUT our faith.... moments of tension when our actions or politics don't match up with our theological convictions or the teachings of scripture. As to war and famine, while we may not have lived through the thirty years war, we have all lived through war and we know what it means to rely on God at times when our nation is torn apart. Perhaps some of you lived through the Great Depression and can relate to hunger. I trust none of us in this room has ever had to live through conditions of famine and wars but yes, we can all can find opportunities to find gratitude midst despair and serving our neighbors through personal sacrifice. We were not have been a part of the Anglican Church in the 1800's but as Presbyterians in the early 2000's I know we can understand a denomination divided and losing members and churches because of our own human interpretations. These words of our Christian ancestors still are a part of our lived faith. We have learned about what we believe and how to live out our faith from the experiences of these saints

who have gone before us. Through these hymns their testimonies remain alive and active in our faith.

And so now friends, I invite you to join me in the preaching of the word by joining our voices together in song. Please take a moment to look through the hymnal and find an old faithful that has somehow shaped your faith. Or perhaps... it's a new song that you would want the generations to come to hear and grow from as well. Let us now continue our reflection on the Word and communion of saints through our morning Hymn Sing!

HYMN SING

Through the faith of our saints, through the faith of **our** generation, and through the faith of the generations that is to come.... may each of live out our faith as one body of Christ. Let us now come before God in prayer.....