

“Without a Trace”

30 October 2005

(All Saints Day)

Bible Passage: **Hebrews 12:1** (NIV)

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Sermon nugget: Remembering and honoring our loved ones who’ve died, and the legacy they leave behind.

As I’ve said to you on previous occasions, I don’t watch much TV, for a variety of reasons. However, I have caught part of a segment of a show that’s called “Without a Trace,” and I’ve been able to figure out that it’s a drama about missing persons. It’s based on the Missing Persons Squad of the FBI whose sole responsibility is to find person who are missing. They do that by retracing the details of the time prior to their disappearance, and by trying to learn who the person is in order to learn where the person is.

Now, as you’ve heard, today is All Saints Day, and that’s a time that we pause to remember our loved ones who have died. I’m well aware that dealing with the death of someone dear to us is a difficult thing, and we really resist the idea that the person has disappeared from our daily lives, even though that may sometimes be the way it feels. When I officiate at a funeral service, I sometimes say that it can seem as though a curtain has been drawn across the stage, sealing us off from the person we’ve loved so much. At that moment, it can seem as though our life partner, or parent or sibling or child has disappeared from the face of the earth.

However, any of us who have walked those roads understand that they really haven’t disappeared at all. Oh sure, they are no longer with us physically on a daily basis, but most of us become very aware of the way in which they remain with us, and in many ways, a constant part of us. Our loved ones have not disappeared without a trace. They live in our hearts and in our memories forever. As Thomas Campbell said, **“To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die,”** and I think he’s right.

There are so many ways in which we hold the memory of those we love very near and dear to our hearts. We may remember some of their looks, their loves, some innuendoes, maybe some of their favorite sayings. We certainly do that in our family. For instance, seldom does our family sit down to a holiday dinner without echoing my Dad’s words, who immediately after the prayer was finished, always said, “Pass the beans.” We almost always joke about my Mom, who was forever forgetting the rolls in the oven and who would suddenly jump up from the table, saying, “Oh, the rolls!” And we almost always had rolls that were a bit burned on the bottom. Or we joke about Mike’s Dad (Mac), who one Christmas Eve wanted to take a picture quickly of something that was going on. He couldn’t find his camera, and began shouting at Mike’s Mom (who had difficulty

hearing) to “get the Kodak!” I suppose most of us have some of those little things that we remember with fondness when we think about someone we love.

You know, I haven’t always been very good about taking the time to remember and honor some of my family and the ways in which their lives were so significant for me. So, a couple of years ago, when I was on my Lilly-funded renewal leave, I spent some time connecting with my roots. One of the things I did was to go to Madison, Indiana, where I grew up, and I went to the cemeteries where my grandparents and aunts and uncles were buried. I remember going there with my parents when I was child, because my folks were always good about putting flowers on the graves for all those special days.

Even though it had been years since I’d been to a couple of those places, I could walk right to the gravesites, and I did what some people probably think is a bit strange—I took pictures of the stones marking their graves. I did that because I can’t always remember the years in which they died, and I wanted to have that as a part of our family record for our daughter to have, should she ever want or need it. And I also wanted to have the pictures to use to jar my memory—to think about the grandmother who made many of the quilts I have, --to think about the grandmother who had arthritis so badly I never knew her to walk. I wanted to think about the grandfather who took me to church each Sunday and with whom I rang the bell. I wanted to remember the uncle who would always come on Christmas and ask me to play the piano for him, after, of course, he had put a number of quarters on the various keys for me to find when I went to the piano.

I wanted to remember, and I doubt that I’m much different from you in that regard. We all want to remember and honor those family members and friends who have died. And when we remember, it becomes very clear to us that they have certainly not disappeared, leaving no trace. Their words and actions still live loudly in our lives.

Video: “Big Fish”

Message part 2

There are so many ways in which people remember and honor those special people in our lives. In my files, I found something I had clipped out a number of years ago about Dan Bastine, a local potter, who died at the age of 49 of a brain tumor. I always think of him when we go to the State Fair, because we always visit the Pioneer Village, where there’s a stand that has Bastine pottery for sale. Dan Bastine started out at Conner Prairie, and then he and his wife opened their own shop, which I visited some time ago. My Mom bought a piece of his pottery before she died, and she always loved it. So, going to the fair brings back the memory of this man, and I am warmed by the fact that his family has kept alive the tradition that he forged.

I read about a woman named Laura Brown whose husband, a professor at the University of Tennessee Martin, was killed in 2000 while riding his bike. Both he and his wife were strong advocates for healthy living, and he had designed a greenway to be built in their area for walkers, runners, cyclists and skaters. The greenway is being built now, and it is to be named the “Brian Brown Memorial Greenway” to honor his life. His wife, who continues to raise their young

children, says, “You’ve got to remember the good times.” And indeed we do.

The Bible passage we have for today is talking about remembering and honoring those who’ve gone before us. Now, this passage is found in the book of Hebrews, but no one is certain who the writer is. Whoever it is, it is someone who spent some time remembering the people of faith who had lived in the past. The writer recalls the faith of the likes of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and more, and then writes the words we have today: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

In essence, the writer wants to remember those who’ve gone before us, the paths they walked and the trails they blazed for us. The Bible passage is letting us know that we are surrounded by the witness of the lives they have led, and their influence continues to touch our lives in many more ways than we can possibly name—ways that have made our lives so much richer because they have gone before us.

Video: “Kingdom Come”

Message part 3

Someone likened the message of our Bible passage to being part of a relay team in track. Now I don’t know a whole lot about that, but one thing I do know is that not every team member is perfect, and in the same way that there’s not a life that is flawless or perfect. Nevertheless, each member of the team stays in the race, and does what he or she can—sometimes making a poor pass of the baton, and sometimes making a good one, sometimes running too slowly, and sometimes gaining some speed.

Taking that analogy a bit farther, it means that those loved ones who have died have run their part of the race. I’m sure they didn’t run perfectly, and sometimes we may not have appreciated the way they were participating in the race. Nonetheless, they are the first runners, and they have paved a way for us.

In a very real sense those who’ve gone before us have passed the baton to us. They have been our pioneers, our teachers, our examples, and they have cleared the way for us. They inspire us to reach higher and run farther. As the Bible passage says, their example is one that causes us to throw off everything that holds us back, and energizes us to run forward with perseverance—to live our lives to the best of our ability so that we, too, in receiving the baton, can run our best, and do our part to have a good hand-off to the next runners. You see, the time will come when our race on this earth is over, and we will pass the baton, and become a part of that “cloud of witnesses.”

Not long ago, I was having lunch with some friends, and one of them almost spilled something. She smiled, and said that her family was always talking about “these old hands,” and the way those hands are prone to spilling things. Well, that really caught my attention, and I found myself picturing my Dad’s hands, hands that were big and rough, hands that were evidence of the hard work he spent his entire life doing.

Today, as we remember and honor those loved ones who've gone before us, I'd like to invite us to think about their hands, and the many ways in which those hands touched and held each of us. Those hands worked hard in life, and at the same time, they gently held precious babies in them. Those hands shook in greeting friend and stranger alike, and those hands sometimes shook in unsteadiness as the years passed. Those hands stroked our hair, and drove us to games or the doctor. Those hands cranked homemade ice cream, dug in the garden, repaired broken bikes or toys. Those hands wore rings symbolizing years of relationship; those hands helped us cross the street. Those hands clasped together in prayer, and those hands held us close when we needed it, and set us free when we were ready. Those hands—frail hands, strong hands, loving hands, caring hands—those hands wanted to do the best they could for us. Those hands carried the baton, and now they have passed it to us.

Remembrance Video

Close:

As we leave here this morning, let's know that it is good to remember, to let us leave here, committed to honoring their lives with ours.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.