

Communion of Saints

Hebrews 11:4 begins the “roll call of faith,” mentioning by name Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Moses, Rahab, and others. This is not a gallery of success or accomplishment; these are not winners and world shakers. Most of them wouldn’t be called successful by any standard. But they kept the faith. And so they are remembered.

This passage is our family tree. Here are listed the men and women who have gone before and blazed the trail for us. Here are our foremothers and forefathers, the ones on whose shoulders we now stand. Their faithfulness has given birth to other children of faith.

If anything has encouraged us as we have attempted to live in community, it has been a companionship of others on this journey—some close by and some far away, some contemporaries, and some from the pages of history—but all sisters and brothers untied in a common hope, a “communion of saints.”

This book* is a collection of their stories, a tribute to the people and the movements they spawned, which have inspired and sustained us. Although in some instances the historical situations in which they witnessed have changed, each person has spoken as a prophet, proclaiming the gospel in a concrete reality, in a manner that will never be outdated. Ephemeral events have inspired lasting testimony, upon which the community of faith will draw for generations to come.

This collection is not an exhaustive one, often making painful choices about whom to include and whom to leave out. So the individuals included here stand for many others who remain unnamed. We have chosen to organize their stories according to the Beatitudes. While many stories could have fit into several categories, each seemed to have a most compelling aspect to it—a life marked by humility or compassion, a strength born out of grieving or persecution, a courage rooted in conviction. Each person here has made the path a bit easier for the rest of us.

We have been granted a rich legacy by the strength and courage of these and many other heroes of the faith. But they do not ask us to enshrine them; they invite us to follow them. The Hebrews passage continues: “And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40).

These verses remind us that, though we might never see the results we hoped for, our disappointment simply puts us in good company. But most important of all, they place the responsibility on each of us to carry on—because “apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

We act in faith for the sake of the faithful ones who went before us, trusting that we would follow—and for those who will come after us on this journey. Those who have begun before—and those who will follow—are invested in our struggle for faithfulness.

In the closing words of her last book, Penny Lernoux quoted a young Guatemalan peasant woman. The words were a reflection on the gospel mandate to lay down our lives, offered a few months before this woman was killed by the Guatemalan military. “What good is life,” she said, “unless you give it away?—unless you can give it for a better world, even if you never see that world but have only carried that grain of sand to the building site. Then you are fulfilled as a person.”

In the words of our good friend Vincent Harding, “living in faith is knowing that even though our little work, our little seed, our little brick may not make the whole thing, the whole thing exists in the mind of God, and that whether or not we are there to see the whole thing is not the most important matter. The most important thing is whether we have entered the process.”

But what about when we get tired? What about those days when it is difficult to hang on to hope, when we are more aware of our weaknesses and failures than our successes, when it seems that nothing we do makes any difference and, despite our effort things seem to go from bad to worse?

Hebrews beckons us again, with an invitation and a challenge: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which 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 joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is sitting at the right side of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Vincent Harding likens these witnesses to “a great cheering squad for us. In the midst of everything that seems so difficult, that seems so powerful, that seems so overwhelming, they may be saying to us: ‘We are with you,’ and “there is a way through; there is a way to stand; there is a way to move; there is a way to hope; there is a way to believe. Don’t give up!”

There is nothing—no emotion or struggle or obstacle—that we face that these witnesses haven’t already faced. And surely, someday, we will all meet around the table of faithfulness, to share a banquet of joy. Vincent Harding describes the scene:

“Well, here we are, all present and accounted for. What a gang! What a table! What a host! What a chance for holding and being held, for feeding and being fed, for giving, receiving, and being the light.

“No excuse for drooping—at least not for long. No excuse for not running—or at least for walking strong. No excuse for staying down. ‘Cause we are surrounded, folks. So, let’s straighten up; let’s get refreshed at the table, and then get down with some real long-distance walking and running—and maybe some flying, like eagles, in due time. That’s our tradition. That’s our destiny. That’s our hope. So go right on, sisters and brothers, people of the tents; walk in the light, run with the cloud, mount up on wings, follow the Pioneer, There is a city to build.”**

--Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday, editors, *Cloud of Witnesses*, Orbis Books, 1991, pp. xv-xvii.

*This reading comes from the introduction to a collection of articles, originally published in *Sojourners* magazine.

**Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in a quote found in *The Soul Afire: Revelations of the Mystics*, H.A. Reinhold, ed., Image Books, 1973, pp. 459-60, also described this city:

“That which is the house of God is also a city. For the house of God is the people of God; for the house of God is the temple of God. And what does the Apostle say? The temple of God is holy, which are you. But all the faithful who are the house of God are not only those who now exist, but those who have been before us and have already slept, and those who are to come after us unto the world’s end. Innumerable hosts of the faithful gather into one body, but counted by the Lord of whom the Apostle said, The Lord knows them who are His; those grains which are yet grown among the shaft, which will constitute one mass, when the floor in the end shall be winnowed; the whole number of faithful Saints, destined to be changed from the human state that they may become equal with the Angels of God; themselves joined unto the Angels, who are no longer pilgrims, all together make one house of God, and one city.”