



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

LOOKING BACK TO SEE THE FUTURE

November 6, 2016

Stewardship Sunday  
All Saints' Day

Hebrews 11 - 13 (selected portions)

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 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.*

*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place to receive an inheritance, not knowing where he was going. By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth for fear of the Egyptians. By faith the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land to escape the Egyptians. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had received the spies in peace.*

*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Sampson, David and Samuel—who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, won strength out of weakness. In all of this, they were commended for their faith.*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings too closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

*Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.*

*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured. Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

The list of biblical heroes has always intrigued me because they're not your usual list of saints and heroes. There was Moses who killed an Egyptian and had to go into hiding, but he was called to lead Israel out of slavery. There was King David, who had an illicit affair with the wife of another man, then had the husband killed in order to have the woman as his wife. Yet he is still remembered as the greatest king of Israel. There was Rahab, a prostitute who hid the Israelite spies as they cased Jericho to conquer it. A murderer, an adulterer, and a prostitute as models of faith? Even more astonishing, perhaps, is that the harlot Rahab was the great grandmother of King David of whom Jesus was a direct descendent. But such is the list of the honored faithful, warts and all.

Even Jesus is without reference to a holy title, a man with a common name; not messiah, not risen lord, not the Christ. Simply Jesus. No pious ancient scribe slipped in a Christological title, making only the claim of an unembellished human being from Galilee who lived naming the truth and died because of it.

A saint, according to scripture, is not someone who is perfect, but someone who is faithful to God. Someone who shows hospitality to strangers, who visits prisoners, who welcomes those other people cast aside, who seeks justice and inclusive love. The great cloud of witnesses is comprised of people who by human standards have tarnished reputations, but whose activity for all things just and right are saints. Martyrs are not necessarily those who have **died** for a cause but those who **lived** for a worthy cause. In the process, some have died rather than denounce their belief in what is right, standing for truth regardless of the consequences. And Jesus as the quintessential saint and martyr becomes our model of faith.

Our church rests on the foundation of those who have gone before us and who have sacrificed for the ideals of their beliefs. The vitality of the church depends on keeping alive the memory of these who are our heritage. G. K. Chesterton reminds us that tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant governance by a privileged few who merely happen to be walking about. The wise community of faith, going forward, will cultivate a sense that it is truly "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses" who continue to inspire us in the present.

But a church's health also depends on avoiding an uncritical nostalgia for the past, whether as church or nation. Sentimental attachment to the seven last words of the church—we've never done it that way before—and a wistful longing for some bygone golden age are forms of religious escapism . . . . not biblical faith. Jeroslav Pelikan reminds us that "tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." Tradition is the transformation of memory into courageous hope, not the memory of the past as false security.

So today we look to our own cloud of witnesses who inspire us to an unknown future. I think of the whole congregation who sacrificed to build this building. There was Epaphias Clark, one of Aurora's early settlers, who mortgaged his house in 1860 in order to give the huge sum of \$100 so New England Church could present its first church building free of debt. And there were those who were so moved by his actions that they came together to pay off his mortgage. There was Rev. Haskell and Deacon Pike who helped organize the YMCA in Aurora in 1869 to provide a "Christian reading room to guard young people from the evil influences that surround them." There was Charles Norton and Charles Harkison who, in 1910, organized the Boy Scouts and invested their lives in this organization that still influences young men to the larger values of life. There was Emeline Messenger who as a little girl was influenced to truth and justice by her family who took into their own home those slaves seeking freedom and who in her own right had an unquenchable thirst for reading and knowledge. Her name now graces the library in North Aurora. It was Emeline who is oft quoted at stewardship time as having said: Don't give until it hurts; give until it feels good.

As New England Church stands on the precipice of a new era, our future stands in the balance. The church across the globe is morphing into something new, though no one can predict what that will look like. In order to stay vital and relevant, the church must acclimate to a changing culture. Storefront churches are thriving; faith communities that have met in tall-steeple buildings are realizing they cannot sustain ministry to the homeless and hungry while spending a lot of money on buildings. I maintain, however, that buildings serve as tools for ministry, and those of us who can sustain buildings while also doing significant ministry, should commit to doing so. Who among us doesn't feel a great sense of peace when we sit among these beautiful windows and these ancient pews? People tell me when they walk into this building, even when no one is here, they feel peace. And often on Sundays, I walk into this room after the service and the aroma of 126 years of people worshiping in this space inspires me. They and we are in the woodwork, the pews, the walls, and the windows. It is the combined presence of those who have come before us, those of us who are here now, and the generations of people who will come after us.

We are like oarsman in a rowboat: facing one way, moving the other way. Which way will we face and in which direction will we go? That is what we ask ourselves on this day of remembering those who have gone before us and give our support—financial and moral—for those who come after us. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. God give us faith to look back long enough to see the future as we build the bridge into tomorrow while we walk on it.

—Gary L. McCann