



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

MY GRANDFATHER'S BLESSING

November 3, 2019

1 King 2.1-3

When David's time to die drew near, he charged his son Solomon, saying: "I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in God's ways and keeping God's statutes, commandments, ordinance, and testimony, as it is written in the law of Moses. Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David"

My grandfather would never make it on a list of would-be saints. I grew up in the same small Michigan town where he and my grandmother lived and were well-known. I was almost 40 when he died and I remember him well. He was a large man, who loved life and who, in spite of internal struggles and worries, had this large laugh and this smile that adorned a rather W.C. Fieldish nose. He would say 'Good Morning' whether it was morning, afternoon, or evening just to throw things off a bit, and keep it light. When asked how he was doing, he would say, "Well, Mom's afraid I'm gonna live," referring to my grandmother who liked to keep a tight rein on him. The last time I was with my grandfather, we were sitting in his living room. He was in his usual comfy chair, to my left, so that his weak right ear would be able to hear me better. Knowing he was hard of hearing, I was talking louder than usual. He kept adjusting his hearing aid, and I kept talking louder. He adjusted it again, and this time it made that squeaky sound when they're on too high. He leaned over to me and said, "Gar, could you talk a little softer. I can't turn my hearing aid down any farther."

I had a conversation with my grandfather that I'll remember all my life. We talked of this and that, and he, in his usual form, made jokes about life and the daily quirks that life entails. I had just made the decision to move from the Baptist church, where my fundamentalist family perceived I had one foot in hell because it wasn't the right kind of Baptist church, to New England Church, which left no doubt in their mind that both feet were firmly planted in Satan's playground. Most of my family didn't know what to say when I told them, but my grandfather looked at me and said "Are you happy to go to this church, Gar?" I told him I was very excited. "Well, then, I'm happy for you," he said, as he smiled and slapped me on the shoulder with that universal gesture of grandfatherly approval. It was a gift that made him a saint in my mind.

On All Saints' Day we gather to remember and to give thanks to those who have been saints to us. 'Saint' is an ambiguous word. Is it anyone who is dead? Is it just those who have been honored by tradition, who have received the official designation from the church for some heroic deed done or a pious life lived, like St. Francis, St. Nicholas, St. Joan? Most saints lived very human lives, getting it wrong as often as they got it right. Ultimately it isn't their perfection that prompts the status of saint, but rather what they inspire in us that makes them saints to us.

The saints are saints not because they were blameless or pure but because they touched deeply the ground of all existence and evoked it within us. They helped us connect to something significant and holy, even if it was just one small sentence that we'll remember the rest of our lives.

Today we come to remember those who were saints in this church, those who were saints to us, those who connected us to Something and Someone larger than ourselves, those who touched the inner core of our being and awakened the Holy in us. We come to commune with them, with one another, with the past and the future in the present. We come to commune with God in the community that is called the body of Christ. We share bread and wine, mindful that we are alive, enjoying life in the present moment for whatever it is, connected in some mysterious way to those who have gone before us and those who will come after us.

This small bit of food is a way to help resurrect dead spirits so they can touch the kingdom of life. The mystery is experienced not because of the words that are said or the elements we ingest, but that we eat and drink together in the community of faith, mindful that we are blessed. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that 'if we allow ourselves to touch our bread deeply, we become reborn, because our bread is life itself. Eating it deeply, we touch the sun, the clouds, the earth, and everything in the cosmos...We touch life, and we touch the Kingdom of God.' (*Living Buddha, Living Christ*, p.30). We continue this tradition in this church for over 160 years, reenacting this meal with all the saints of this congregation who have been our inspiration these many decades.

In her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen writes:

My grandfather was an Orthodox rabbi, a man of many blessings...blessings for food, blessings to be said when you wash your hands, when you see the sun rise, when something is lost or found...He said them all, tipping his black fedora to the Holy many times each day as he dealt with the smallest details of daily life, mindful that each one was a gift.

My grandfather died when I was seven years old, she writes. I had never lived in a world without him in it before, and it was hard for me. He had looked at me as no one else had and called me by a special name, 'Neshume-le' which means 'beloved little soul.' There was no one left to call me this anymore. At first I was afraid that without him to see me and tell God who I was, I might disappear. But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his eyes. And that once blessed, we are blessed forever.

"The story of Hannukah says that God's light burns in the darkness even without oil, and it is so," said my grandfather. "That is one of the miracles of the light. But there is more. There is a place in everyone that can carry the light. God has made us this way. When God says, 'Let there be light,' he is speaking to us personally...He is telling us what is possible, how we might choose to live. But one candle does not do much in the darkness. God has not only given us the chance to carry the light, he has made it possible for us to kindle and strengthen the light in one another,

passing the light along. This is the way that God's light will shine forever in this world...This is true. My grandfather said so."

At this communion meal, we raise a toast in thanksgiving for all the saints, even as we take on the responsibility to bear the light of being saints for those who come after us. Amen.

–Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the past, the present, and the future, this past week we have seen in the eyes of the future generations the twinkle of Halloween delight, a cabaret of sorts, with costumes that spur the imagination to be anyone they want to be, if only for a night, and sweet treats to chase away the sour moments of life, if only temporarily. In times of terror and war and sadness all around, we are grateful for an evening of revelry to lift us out of the dullness of all that would want to weigh us down. We adults are grateful to be able to enjoy the antics of those who have rung our doorbells, and equally grateful for the discipline to have shunned eating all the sweets set aside for our little visitors.

Amid the fun of the season, we are mindful of the holy ghosts, as it were, honored on all Hallows Eve, remembering those who have gone before us, those we call saints, those who by their example have modeled the best we can hope to be.

Some saints we honor are ancient, now almost mythic and distant, but some of those we have known: mothers, fathers, children, brothers, sisters, grandparents, who today are not with us in flesh and blood but who are with us in powerful new ways through spirit and memory and love.

We thank you for the mark they've left on our souls, for the legacies of integrity and love they have given us to enjoy, and also for the peace they now enjoy in the mysterious realm of Your Holy Presence.

In tribute to them, may we live lives to honor them. May we not forget the best they were able to be, to forgive their shortcomings and weaknesses, to honor their memory by the way we live our lives so we might be honorable saints for those who come after us.

In the name of the God of all, Amen.