**Next Steps to Risk Taking Discipleship**

**Anchored in Hope: Next Steps in Faithful Witness**

**Hebrews 12:1-3**

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One of the things that never ceases to amaze me is how God has created the rhythms of the natural world to so beautifully reflect our experiences in human life. Or maybe it’s the other way around - God creates our human experiences to reflect the rhythms of the natural world. The change of seasons is an obvious example right now - we go from dormancy to new birth to the fullness of life to the waning brilliance of autumn. Perhaps my favorite example is the life cycle of a butterfly which reminds us not only of the promise of new birth and new beginnings but also that God is always about transforming us - making good from our mistakes, helping us grow from our losses, and offering us opportunities to grow in beauty and fullness. Of course, we don’t always see God at work. Often, God’s work of transformation happens through the people we encounter in our lives.

Today is All Saints Day. It’s the day, always right after Halloween, when we celebrate the people in our lives who have somehow shaped and molded who we are. Often, those are people who have passed away and so, in this church, we have a tradition of reading the names aloud of those from our congregation who have died in the last year. That said, saints may also still be living - people who continue to inspire us, teach us, help us be the best of who we can be. Unlike our Catholic brothers and sisters, we as Methodists don’t have a process for becoming a saint. There are no predetermined qualifications. In fact, we understand that everyone has the potential to be a saint - a person who lives faithfully in following Jesus and inspires others to do the same.

In a sense, you could say our saints are the people who have transformed us and the world by their faithfulness. We’re in the middle of a sermon series that encourages us to continue growing in our discipleship of Christ - to decide on a next step in how we pray and worship, how we learn about God, how we serve God and humanity, and, today, how we live in a way that might transform or inspire others. What better way to figure out our own next step than by remembering and giving thanks to those who have inspired us?

So, I’d like you to think about who has been a great example to you of what it means to be someone who follows Jesus. What was it about that person that was so inspiring or faithful? Take a couple of minutes and tell someone sitting near you about that person.

Saints, of course, can be figures from history or alive today, they may be famous or just ordinary people. I have all sorts of saints who have inspired me - many of whom were Methodists. For example, back in the late 1700’s, the Church of England had become pretty exclusive. In many of the churches, it seemed as though only the wealthy were welcome. No one seemed to be reaching out to help others or to speak out against injustices. A young man, a student at Oxford, began to seriously study what Jesus taught and came to believe that you cannot be a faithful follower of Jesus without helping people. There was no holiness, he said, without social holiness.

When he became a priest in the Church of England, he started working to reform the church. He ended up creating a movement that encouraged both personal holiness, developing one’s relationship with God, and social holiness. He, himself, began preaching all over the country. He preached to coal miners and peasant women and orphaned children. He started prison ministries, schools, medical clinics, and feeding programs. As his movement gained popularity, his voice became more well-respected, and he used his influence to speak against the global slave trade and the genocide of Native Americans in this country. He gave away everything he had, keeping just what he needed, and he died with nothing - just as he hoped he would. Some of you, no doubt, have figured out who he is - John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who lived so faithfully in his love for God and his love for others.

There are a lot of other Methodists in history who are saints for me, as well. Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave who became an outspoken abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights. Isabella Thoburn and Clara Swain who heard of the lack of education and health care for women in India and moved there to start a women’s college and women’s hospital, Jessie Daniel Ames who in 1931 became the Executive Director of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching.

Then, there are the saints who were members of this church back in the 1930’s. Some of you have heard this story, but it bears repeating. It was the height of the Depression when the congregation of this church learned that their beloved building, built in 1866, was on the verge of literal collapse. The walls had spread apart, the roof trusses had pulled apart. The building would not be safe for much longer.

In 1937, they created a building committee to investigate the cost of repairs. Their conclusion was that the necessary repairs were just too expensive. They would be better off building a new building. By 1938, they had formed a building committee. First, they had to come up with $100,000 to keep the existing building safe enough for the interim. Then, they agreed they would need to raise $300,000 (the equivalent of almost 5 Million dollars today). The Wesley Foundation would come up with $100,000 and the church with $200,000. Harry Earhart was chair of the building committee and wealthy enough to promise $100,000. The Kresge Foundation promised $100,000 for Wesley. But, the church still had to come up with another $100,000 (about 1.6 million today) - in the midst of the Great Depression - when unemployment was 25%.

And they did it. On October 6, 1940, this building in which we are worshipping right now was dedicated. And they had $41.40 left over. They believed in the church and the difference the church could make in the world. They believed in student ministry. They believed that people who follow Jesus have a calling to serve and care for others. And so, out of their own pockets, they built a new building.

I want to share one more example of my own saints with you today. This one is much more personal - and, perhaps, more typical of what we think of when we talk about saints. That would be my mom and dad. If I were going to name anyone who has taught me by their example what it means to follow Jesus, it would be Bev and Jack Crump.

My parents both grew up Methodist and the influence of Methodism can be seen in both of their families. All four of my grandparents were educators and intentionally lived out their faith in their acceptance and care for those who were different from themselves. My mom’s father was a school principal in a school that was racially integrated long before that became the law. My father’s father was a school principal who protested when his Japanese students were sent off to internment camps.

My parents were active Methodists as youth and then as students. They met at the Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois and grew into faith with their beliefs in Methodism and beliefs in social justice completely intertwined. When their four children were born, they intentionally raised us in a community that is both racially and economically diverse. In the 1960’s and 70’s, that led to some real challenges for us, but they believed we would be better people for it. And I think they were right. For them, living among all kinds of people just made for opportunities to be accepting and compassionate in the ways that Jesus was. Both of my parents were active in our community - particularly in ways that helped others and built bridges between different groups. Both of my parents were also active in UMW - particularly in what was then called the School of Christian Missions. And, though we were certainly not wealthy, my parents always gave to the church because that is one way we grow in faith - and they taught me that the only way the church can be the church is when people gave the money to sustain it Finally, when the opportunity came to be missionaries in India for a year, they grabbed it - taking along three teenage daughters - because what could teach us better what the church is meant to do than to be part of the church at work among the poorest of God’s children.

So, there you have it - a little bit about my saints. And that brings me back to butterflies. One of the things I realized as I began to think of saints is that what all of these people have in common is hope - and hope, too, is beautifully represented by the butterfly. These saints of mine each believed that how they lived their lives - in helping others, giving of themselves and their money, learning about faith, standing up for justice - how they lived their lives would impact the world. That the message of Jesus - the message of love and compassion and acceptance - could counter slavery and poverty and racism and sexism and so many others of society’s biggest problems. And because of them, I have hope, too. I believe that with the message of Jesus, we can counter gun violence and hate crimes and prejudice and hunger.

So, who has given you hope through how they have lived their life? And, equally important, whose life will you give hope to? What can you learn from the saints in your life? What next step can you take in living faithfully so that you might inspire the generation that follows us?

In a few minutes, we will celebrate Holy Communion. We will give thanks for all the saints in our lives and for all the gifts that God has given us. When you come up for Communion, as you take the bread and place it in the cup, I invite you to say the name of a saint in your life. Honor them by speaking their name aloud. And then as you head back to your seat, stop and pick up a little butterfly to remind you of how God has used the saints to transform you and give you hope just as God calls you to be a saint to someone else.

May it be so.

Amen.