

## **Saints Alive – Part 2**

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**

Last Sunday I began a two-proclamation series on saints. While Halloween was on October 31<sup>st</sup>, All Saints Day was the day after, November 1<sup>st</sup>. In the church we observe All Saints Day on the first Sunday thereafter, which is today. While acknowledging that a saint is not a perfect person, last week I said, “A saint is someone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. A saint is one in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Saints are very human, but saints are those who allow God to be the controlling agent in their lives.” I want us to keep that definition of a saint in mind as we proceed.

The church in Thessalonica had a problem. They were so convinced that Christ’s return was imminent they stopped working and were just waiting for him. They were also worried that their loved ones who had already died would be forgotten when Christ returned. Paul’s letter to them was to assuage their fears and explain how the faithful face death.

This passage has sometimes been used by religious nuts to predict the end of the world, the latest being the Reverend Harold Camping in California. He predicted the end of all things would occur on May 21<sup>st</sup> of this year. When that didn’t happen, he “recalculated” and predicted it would happen on October 21<sup>st</sup>. Looks like we’re still here.

Paul says in verse 14 that all who have died in the Lord are not separated from him but are with him still and he will bring them with him when he returns. Though death separates us from our loved ones, it does not separate them from God. In fact, Paul says, when the Lord returns, the dead will be the first ones he awakens and all the faithful will be together again. Paul emphasizes that whether alive or dead, we belong to Christ. What matters for Paul, and what should matter for us, is that we are always with the Lord, and we will always be with the Lord.

Religious quacks like Camping notwithstanding, Paul doesn’t say anything about when the end times will occur – only that they will at some point in history, and that we ought to encourage each other with this reality. Jesus had the definitive word on the timing of the end of all things. He said in Mark 13:32 “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Jesus went on to say that we are to be ready. In other words, we are to live our faith daily, and when we do that, then we will not have anything to fear when the Lord does come back.

When we live in this manner, then we can deal with death. Not only can we face the prospect of our own death with hope, but we can face the death of a loved one with that same hope and peace. How do people who don’t believe in God deal with death, anyway? Non-believers say that at the end of one’s time on earth everything a person was, stood for, and accomplished is lost forever. With that kind of philosophy there is no hope whatsoever.

We know that there is a God who loves us and wants us close to himself. From that we have comfort knowing that the death of the body is not the end of the story. Paul opened this passage by saying: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

When a loved one dies in the faith, we grieve for our loss, not theirs. When death comes to a follower of Christ, the kingdom is opened and glorious truths of God are made manifest to them.

The people who live and act by the words of Jesus and Paul, who know to whom they belong and where they are going when their earthly lives are over, are saints. Remember our definition: “A saint is someone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. A saint is one in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. Saints are very human, but saints are those who allow God to be the controlling agent in their lives.”

I want to tell you about a saint in my life who is now with God in his eternal kingdom. Her name is Lena Peterson and she was my maternal great-grandmother. Born in Norway in 1860, she left her home and native country at the age of 16 and came alone to America on a sailing ship. Making her way to South Dakota, she worked for a family for two years, and then, at age 18 met, fell in love with, and

married a Danish immigrant. They homesteaded a few miles outside of Aberdeen and began to raise a family.

My folks moved near Great-grandma when I was eight years old, and lived there for over a year. I actually attended a one-room school house. Some of my fondest memories are of Great-grandma Lena during that time. After school I would run to her house instead of home so I could spend time with her. She was 88 then, being small, wiry, and full of energy. She walked everywhere. My Dad was 37 then, in good physical shape, and could not out-walk Great-grandma.

I spent many weekends in her home. It had that musty smell that old homes have. The homestead didn't have any electricity or plumbing. Great-grandma's children had long given up trying to convince her to put them into the two-story, clap-board home. She hadn't needed it before and she didn't need it then. The only heat was an oil stove in the living room and a pot-bellied stove in the kitchen.

All the bedrooms were upstairs and all had feather beds. Without any heat upstairs, I'd put my clothes under the feather mattress when I went to bed. The next morning, I'd wake up and it would take me 15 minutes to get up enough courage just to get out of bed. Winters on the South Dakota prairie can be raw and it was freezing when you got up in the morning. I'd finally jump out of bed, grab my clothes from under the mattress and run as fast as I could downstairs to the kitchen. There would be Great-grandma fixing breakfast and the pot-bellied stove would be hot. That's where I got dressed. And then came the cup of steaming hot cocoa.

Another memory that is deeply etched in my memory revolves around the lack of plumbing in great-grandma's house. Summer time was not a problem, but in the dead of winter it was a challenging experience to trudge 50 yards through the snow outside and then use the outhouse. This may be somewhat crude, so forgive me, but I can tell you from personal experience that a page torn from a Sears & Roebuck catalogue and crumpled up before unfolding and using works quite well.

All of these childhood memories don't make my Great-grandma Lena a saint. Her faith does. She had two Bibles. One was a large, family Bible that laid on a sideboard. The other was her personal Bible that she always had close by. Whenever she decided to sit down for a few minutes, she would open her Bible and read. In good weather, she would sit on the porch in her rocking chair, Bible in her lap, reading. And she prayed.

Great-grandma Lena lived to be 104. As an adult I look back on her life and by all accounts would have to say she lived a simple life. But it was not an ordinary life. She bore six children into the world, all of whom became successful, and she had more grandchildren and great-grandchildren than I can begin to count. Most importantly, she was a woman of deep faith. She trusted in God and asked the Lord to be in her life every day of it. That makes my Great-grandma Lena a saint.

I want you to think about the saints in your life. Who lived as a disciple of Jesus Christ and touched your life with their faith; and who is alive today that is doing the same thing for you. We are going to take a few minutes and go around the sanctuary. As I come to where you are sitting, I would ask that you say out loud the name and relationship of one who has lived, or is living now, in the Lord, who has allowed God to be the controlling agent in their lives, and who has touched your life with their life of faith. Doing so honors the saints in our lives and reminds us that we too are called to live the life of a saint. Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 4 November 2011  
[All Saints Sunday]