



Roanoke, Virginia
May 5, 2019

“The Legacy of the Holy Spirit”

Hebrews 12:1-2

George C. Anderson

Those here in worship on Easter Sunday will hear an *echo* in this sermon. I began my Easter sermon talking about the shock of seeing a cathedral built over eight centuries ago... *burn*. To see a structure that seemed to rise above it all burn, surely felt to some like faith in the eternal was in flames. I said that though the cathedral would be rebuilt, even when it is, it still will be not be eternal. Some things we build to last, but nothing we build will last forever. We Christians don't try to build something eternal. What we are called to do is to offer a witness that is enduring.

After all, the Christian faith is not a monument, but a movement... a movement that never grows old because it keeps growing young again, getting renewed by the Spirit of God. The Spirit keeps the body of believers alive even as generations of believers come and go.

Today is “Legacy Sunday.” To speak of a legacy is not to speak of something eternal, but it is to speak of something that evolves and is fluid... something that is enduring that witnesses to the eternal God of heaven.

The preacher of the biblical book of Hebrews has a great appreciation for the legacy of faith (I call the author of Hebrews “the preacher,” because the book of Hebrews is a sermon). Even though the writer of Hebrews lives within a couple of generation of when Jesus walked the fields of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem, he doesn't see the Christian faith as being something new. No, his faith is something ancient, *but renewed*. And so, he tells stories of those who have gone before and passed on the faith that now nurtures him and the congregations he loves. He does so with the kind of warmth and appreciation we would use in speaking of

- Dorothy Gibbony who had the vision to give the seed money to start the Second Fund;
- Ms. Macy, who fed generations of folks in the fellowship hall which is now the Preschool gym;



- of Wes Macy, not related to Ms. Macy, who chaired the search committee that called Bill Klein to this pulpit and who took such loving care of his wife when she needed constant assistance the last years of her life;
- Dr. and Mrs. Michael who, in search of a stolen bike in the most distressed neighborhood of Roanoke, discovered that the neighborhood did not have a church, and so they started one;
- Judge Bev Fitzpatrick who taught Senior High Sunday School for over two decades and who hosted AA style meetings for those he sentenced to the program;
- Barbara Lemon a longtime adult Sunday School teacher and constant friend and confidant for this church's ministers;
- Jack Airheart who quietly volunteered year after year delivering meals and remained so faithful in his prayers for the healing of others.

I could, of course, go on and on.

That's what the preacher of Hebrews does. He tells the stories of people of the past who shaped the faith and character of his church of the present.

- Noah, who built an ark to save others;
 - Abraham, who left his home not knowing where to go, but trusting God;
 - Sarah, who trusted God's promises despite her age;
 - Moses, who left his adoptive household of privilege so he could lead the people of his birth;
 - Rahab, a prostitute, who risked her life to save the lives of Hebrew spies...
- and, of course, he goes on and on.

One ancient Jewish believer after another is presented as beloved members of his church family that he later calls "a cloud of witnesses." Their lives in faith created ripples that he now sees in the worship, prayer and fellowship of his community of Jesus-followers. Each story builds on the one before, and you can almost hear his voice rising with each telling until he gets to his triumphant conclusion. His conclusion is one more story of someone who lived before and whose life and witness has a major impact on who they are to be today.

Here is what he says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Dr. Curt Thompson is a Christian, a psychiatrist, an author... and, by the way, the father of our own Rachel Thompson. A few of you have done what I am finally getting around to doing and that is read one of his books. In his books, Dr. Thompson explores the interrelationship of mental health and the Christian faith.

What he says about memory is what the preacher of Hebrews is saying about legacy:



“Memory is... as much about anticipating the future as it is about recalling the past. We remember things in order to predict what our futures will be like: Where did I put my keys so I can find them when I need to leave? Is it safe to allow my feelings to be revealed, given my experience of sharing them in the past? Is God to be trusted?”¹

We remember to anticipate.

Some, I guess, use memory to anticipate the worst of what others might do, or even to plan the worst they can do... if it is in their self-interest. But for good hearted people—and specifically Christians who genuinely take seriously their call to follow Jesus—they want to receive ripples in order to create more ripples. They want to inherit the legacy of the faithful witness of others because they feel called to make a witness of their own:

say something,
do something,
leave behind something,

that positively impacts those they love and will leave behind... even those they don't even know but who somehow will be blessed because of the witness of their lives. Nothing fixed and permanent, but a witness that is fluid and becomes part of the flow of the Jesus movement that witnesses to what matters in eternity: kindness, compassion, love of God and God's church.

Though this is Legacy Sunday where we give attention to enduring funds, clearly I am speaking of a legacy of faith of which money can have a small part or no part at all. If I could somehow open up a treasure chest that holds all that is good and beautiful, and of God, that has been passed on to me, I would be pulling out

examples set for me,
lessons taught to me,
kindnesses shown me,
punishment administered to me,
forgiveness granted me,
delight taken in me,
confidence shown in me,
friendship given me,
and communities surrounding me.

Still, since this is the Sunday when the funds are in our view, the witness of a Legacy Fund can be illustrative. This Sunday, I'll take permission to talk about one of them to illustrate how ripples from the past flow to the present and on to the future... how something enduring can witness to the eternal.

John Trent, a single parent, raised a daughter with significant health issues. John saw to Kittye Susan's medical needs. He supported her as she enthusiastically pursued her education, and then later as she taught college English. Then, tragically, she died. It about crushed him. But he

¹ Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, p. 50.



found a way to as best he could embrace her death as a witness to their shared faith in the resurrection. The estate he built to leave to her he gave to the church to do for others what he could no longer do for her: provide education... specifically theological education.

The past ripples. John had no idea how his gift would do all that it has done to enhance theological education in this congregation and at places like Massanetta Springs, Montreat, and Union Presbyterian Seminary. But more to the point of my sermon, he had no idea his gift would create something like the *Kitty Susan Trent Symposium for Newly Ordained Ministers*.

The ripples reach the future. Twenty years from now, a minister graced and equipped by the symposium will lead a congregation in establishing something new and powerful—something that we today are simply not smart or creative enough to imagine.

I had some fun trying to imagine a ministry that would be unthinkable today—like self-driving cars owned by the church that would drive those who would otherwise be homebound to the grocery store and church. That sounds too frivolous. But how frivolous would tutoring children with computers at the Presbyterian Community Center have looked to people a half century ago when computers filled rooms and processed punch cards? Change is constant, but the enduring legacy of the power of what we proclaim at baptism, carries on. We who have received faith make a commitment to raise a child in the faith, who then will later make a witness with her life.

In telling the story of the Trent Fund, I guess I told a story of finances. But only on the surface. The story is a parable about the legacy of *anyone who creates ripples that endure—*

- one who teaches, coaches and mentors another in a way that builds Christian character,
- or who is a good friend or loving parent,
- or volunteer,
- or anyone who models Christian ethics at work.

It is the story of

- anyone grateful for a past that has reached them, and then provides a witness that will impact those who follow.

Of course, I commend the funds for those who feel called to support them and have the ability to do so. But what I call for in this sermon is that we all find our own ways to be a part of a movement that will not remain the same when we are gone, but which will, by God's Grace, keep rippling forward making a witness to the eternal love, justice and grace of the Kingdom of God.

