

A Sermon by N. Sellers, preached at First Church Branford, CT on 10-30-16, All Saints

"Confidence"

Psalm 139 & Hebrews 10:32-39

Share this UCC Daily Devotional from week before 10-30-16 by Christina Villa...

Every year on November 1, All Saints Day, I remember Sacred Heart cemetery in the town I grew up in. It was a huge Polish cemetery situated on a long sloping hill next to a busy intersection and we passed it every day on our way almost everywhere. Normally, like all cemeteries, it gave me the creeps, especially because at the very top of the hill there was an enormous 19th century abandoned orphanage that scared me so much I wouldn't even look at it. Naturally, I assumed that all the orphans' parents were buried in the cemetery.

But on the night before November 1, starting at dusk, the entire cemetery would be lit up with thousands of red votive candles. It made it look like the dead were getting ready for a party, like they had turned on all the lights in the house.

I'm sure it seems odd to say the cemetery looked festive, but it really did. On that night, there was nothing "dead" about it. The effect was to confuse the categories of living and dead. It made the dead seem less separated from us, not so different from us. I used to think all those red candles burning all night on the graves must make the dead people happy, or at least cheer them up.

Of course that was what I thought when I was a kid afraid of cemeteries and orphanages. But now I wonder: why not? If death is not the end, then it's not the end of cheer or even joy. And not theoretical, pie-in-the-sky joy, either. The real thing, the same happiness we know now, the kind that makes us put up Christmas lights. The kind of happiness that makes us wish it could last forever. Every year on All Saints Day, I wonder if it does.

All Saints Day presents us with a time to remember the saints who have died in our midst since the last time November 1st arrived. It is also a moment in which to declare our determination to "carry on" in our spiritual journeys, to follow the path laid out for us, by those baptized in the faith and committed in life to the things of God. Honoring the saints has been a feature of Christian worship from the origins of the church, when names of local martyrs were included in the Sunday prayer before the bread and cup were shared. Soon, special days were set aside for remembering martyrs and other exemplary Christians whom individual Christian communities proclaimed to be saints by consensus. When the church became centralized, local saint making was replaced by a more universal and controlled process called "canonization." Eventually, only the "official saints" were liturgically commemorated as models of faith.

Because the saints were thought to share Christ's saving work, Christians relied heavily on their intercession, praying to them and venerating their relics. In the late medieval church, the influence of the saints was enormous. When Protestant reformers shaped new churches, they

retrieved Paul's teaching that saints are all whom God justifies through grace by faith alone. Rather than a posthumous honor for the extraordinary few, sainthood is the common calling of all who are baptized. This was a favorite insight of the Puritans, who routinely called each other "saints."

(www.ucc.org/worship-ways "All Saints Day")

And what of these Puritan "saints?" Between 1630 and 1643 some twenty thousand Puritans left England for the American colonies, as King James 1 began persecuting religious dissenters. In the New World, physically separated from the Anglican church, Puritans set up individual congregations of which ours is one. Each congregation had a right and a duty to encourage their membership and this meant churches included only "visible saints." And what are "visible saints" you might ask?: Christians saved by grace, who were engaged in this worldly struggle by providing tangible evidence of their devotion. Puritans spent a portion of each day privately praying. Regular church attendance was a must. The pursuit of commerce was encouraged, as financial success was considered an outward sign of God's grace. And visible saints tithed as instructed from the Reformers understanding of what the covenant Law of the Old Testament directed, now magnified in light of the new covenant grace offered through Christ. (<http://www.reformedreader.org/puritans/> and <http://peopleof.oureverydaylife.com/did-visible-saint-mean-puritans-7626.html>)

The passage before us in Hebrews picks up with a call to the saints in a much earlier generation Christian community to persevere. It is an ancient motivational speech, a TED talk with a take-away that still holds true today: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful...do not throw away your confidence...for you have need of endurance so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised." (10:23, 35-36) It's this word "confidence" that I'm drawn to in the midst of a time when many of us are experiencing anything but confidence. During a recent staff meeting discussion, we took a few moments to check-in with ourselves as to our own spiritual and emotional temperatures as well as our most recent impressions of what our congregation has been feeling. The words which came back on the white board were: Numb, tired, depressed, withdrawn, overwhelmed. Yes, there have been many months of Reality TV-like bombast; rounds of verbal slug-fests, vulgarity and garishness, with populist clamoring, baiting, anger and threats, real and imagined. The fibers of party loyalties have frayed beyond their normal wear and tear; people are fed up, unsure, weary, ready for something better without knowing what it might take. And in our church, we have had our own rounds of losses and heartache, and challenge. What does it take to have confidence from a Christian perspective? How is it that the saints in our midst as well as those who have gone on before us, managed to hold onto to this confidence in God's grace during their lives?

What we have in the book of Hebrews is an example of encouragement by a devoted pastor in the early Christian church, to the sisters and brothers of this faith community to hold on, to stay rooted in "the groundwork of things hoped for, which is faith." (*To the Hebrews* in Anchor Bible, vol 36 G. Buchanan Doubleday, 1972:183) In so doing one gains the promises of eternity, life everlasting through the atoning work of Jesus the Christ, entering into his rest (4:1), which we affirm is the mystery of death's ultimate defeat through the power of the resurrection. (*Ibid.*)

The meaning of this word 'confidence' includes "boldness," the opposite of "shrinking back" and so being "destroyed." (v. 39, cf. R. Rienecker/C. Rogers *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT* Regency, 1980:705) Our writer describes some of the ways in which individuals in the believing community had suffered the persecutions of being physically or emotionally attacked, imprisoned, and experiencing the loss of their possessions. And still these saints were able to bear suffering with "joy" knowing their future rewards were great. Their boldness or confidence rested in the assurances that through the work of Jesus, in death and resurrected life, there was a new and living way to pursue faithfulness despite the challenges of life in the present. (ref. R. Brown in *The Message of the Hebrews*, TBST series, pp. 184-195) No matter what, faith would see them through...

I wonder what you and I might say as to where our confidence lies? What is it about your faith or practice that gives you confidence? There are so many different answers to choose from in terms of what our culture and the world around us provides to fill in the answer: financial success, wealth, achievements, class standing, access to power, personal control...

We are called, according to our text and to the traditions of our faith, old and new, to persevere in the hope that we have through the eternal promises of the Holy One who has blessed us with the saving grace that is Christ Jesus: our confidence comes through holding fast to this and the way it shapes our lives, offers us community, the place in which to learn and to love and to endure no matter what comes. And among our purposes as the church in this place is to build on this foundation; rather than to shrink, to have boldness and confidence to be the church moving forward into this new age before us....

Here in the midst of our worship, we take time now to remember those whose confidence rested in God's promises and who have died in this congregation during the past year: Here we name the names of our saints, and celebrate that their journeys are now complete. Amen.....*READ NAMES with ringing of bell after each... Prayer to follow by liturgist.*