

McCabe United Methodist Church
"Writing Your Own Obituary"
Hebrews 12:1-3
October 25, 2009
Pastor Gary Walters

I know our scripture lesson this morning says Hebrews 12, but I'm actually going to start in Chapter 11 and just read bits and pieces from throughout that. I think most of us will be familiar with the passage and you'll get the gist of where I'm going with this pretty quick.

"By faith, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cane did. By faith Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death. By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family and by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob, by faith Jacob when he was old blessed each of Joseph's sons. By faith, Joseph, when his end was near spoke about the exodus and by faith Moses' parents hid him for three months. By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as a son of Pharaoh's daughter." And jumping down, "And what more shall I say, I do not have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword. Whose weakness was turned to strength and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. They went about in sheep skin and goat skin, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. But of all these, the world was not worthy of them., Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Let me start with a story and let me say I hope this has no basis in fact. But, there were two brothers and they had a reputation in town for corrupt business dealings, for living life on the wild side, for being mean and contentious, just all around the type of folk that you simply did not want to cross paths with or simply did not want to cross. Well,

as happens, one of them eventually died and the younger of the brothers then had the task of finding a priest or a pastor in town who would bury his brother and do a fitting job of memorializing him. But, apparently having some tinge of conscious he kind of put a bribe to go with it. He had searched everywhere and really had no luck but there was a church in town that was in desperate straights and they were in the middle of a building project that they did not have the funds for. This younger brother came to the priest and he said "Father, I'll give your building project \$100,000 IF you'll say that my brother was a saint." The priest had to think about that a little bit and said "Okay, here's the condition though. You'll have to make your donation to the church before the funeral." Well the brother wasn't very thrilled about this, but this being a priest he figured well, okay there's no way he is going to back out on his word so he wrote the check for \$100,000, checks in the bank. The day comes and they go through the liturgy just fine but they get to the part where the priest stands up to give the eulogy and he heads into a tirade about what a low down, good for nothing, scoundrel this brother was. He starts on the long list of all the things that he had done wrong in his life and all the people he had hurt and all the damage that he had done. The younger brother was beside himself, he couldn't believe he'd been taken in by the priest like this and that the priest would go back on his word. But, at the end of his eulogy, the priest said "And as low down, good for nothing as this brother was, compared to him, he's a saint."

All that to say, really what the priest said at that point wasn't going to make a bit of difference. Everybody knew what he was like, they were painfully aware of all of his character defects. He had written his eulogy already with every word and dead of his life. When you get to that point where you're laying in a casket in front of the church, it's too late. There is nothing else can be added or subtracted. Our loved ones might remember us graciously, might even have a family member who bribes the priest to say nice things, but ultimately it will make little difference because we have written our obituary, our eulogy, already.

Well, as it was for this elder brother, so it is for us. So it is for those that we memorialize or remember today. I'm happy to say that as far as I know no one that we are honoring today falls into that category. On the contrary, I've had the privilege of doing several of those funerals and the privilege of knowing a number of those people. And, one of the very holy moments as a pastor, one of the places I'm invited into, never ceases to amaze me, but in doing funerals there is a moment with the family when I ask them "what do you remember most about your loved one." And they open up and tell the most amazing stories. Sometimes it's the quirky and off color things, but more often than not it's their love and their faithfulness, how they would give you the shirt off their back, it's the best parts about themselves that they invested in others to make the others what they are, to make us what we are. And the gift that those loved ones gave is

remembered fondly. And you could hardly ask for a better eulogy.

Well, there is something like that going on in the Hebrews passage today. The writer of Hebrews really paints this picture that it is not just a few loved ones, but it's this whole community of saints who have gone before and the image isn't just this private little setting, it quickly dissolves into a Greek Roman amphitheater, filled to the brim with row after row of these saints who are sitting there cheering and yelling and rooting us on as we do the track, as we run the course of faith in this life. But the author doesn't leave it there. He makes it pretty clear that while they watched maybe the most important, or the more important part, is the example of putting into action, into human flesh, that trail that Christ has already blazed. That they lived out their faith and faithfulness before us, giving us that pattern or that example to follow and how we too should live. So, it's not so much that they watch us but that we look to them. That's, I think, where the fitting tribute, the honoring comes in. That as we remember, as we look to these who have gone before, we honor them by imitating that best part of themselves that they gave to us.

It asks this question, not to have some sort of a morbid, preoccupation with death, but if I was sitting in my office with your family members, and we were planning your funeral and I asked them the question, what do you remember most about _____, (put your name in that place), what would they say and what would you want them to say. It's worth asking the question now while we can do something about it, because once we are here (front of church), laying in a casket, we cannot rewrite the obituary. We write it with every word and action of our lives. So, what would you want them to say. The challenge is to live in such a way that what they say is an accurate reflection of who we are. It's that reminder, that challenge to us, to live out our lives with that love and that faithfulness, investing into others in such a way that what they remember of us is a story that we want retold. We are writing the obituary even now, let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for this great company of saints who have gone before. Those great saints, the stories of the Bible we think about, but we think about the saints closer to home. These that we honor this morning, just those that have loved us, that have invested their lives in us to help make us what we are. So, Lord, help us to follow the best of their example. Help us to follow the path of faith and faithfulness that they have laid before us, that we might honor their memory, in Christ's name we pray. Amen.