

Ancestors

Hebrews 11:23-12:2

Center Church, Hartford

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Here we sit in the Ancient Burying Ground among the ancestors. I often refer to them that way as I walk past, "Hi, Ancestors!" They are not my personal ancestors, nor are any of your ancestors here probably, except for Bruce Bidwell and Craig Cowing, but they are ancestors of this congregation. Probably a majority of them, especially the oldest ones, were members of this church. Some of them were enslaved by members of this church, and some buried here were the enslavers.

That's right, the ancestors were not perfect. Some in big ways, and some in smaller ways. From those who slaughtered native peoples to take their land to those who abused their children or spouses to those who participated in the less dramatic sins of envy or jealousy or the theft of a chicken. Just like your ancestors and my ancestors, no fancy statues or nicely carved gravestones can hide the fact that, as the apostle Paul wrote, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory." The ancestors are not idols to be worshipped but people to learn from, both the good and the bad. We need to tell the whole history of all our ancestors, the good as well as the difficult to hear. As Maya Angelou once wrote, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage, need not be lived again." ("On the Pulse of Morning") Make no mistake, the history of many of the people buried here was full of wrenching pain of all kinds, as well as full of immense courage. We need to know the fullness of the pain and the courage, which takes courage on our part, and deep honesty.

I am reminded of that when I look at this list of ancestors in the book of Hebrews, I think we need to courageously look at the whole story they represent. The writer asks "And what more should I say?"

My response is that you need to be a bit more honest about these folks you name.

What more should I say of Samson? Really? Famous for slaughtering hundreds of Philistines in revenge for his intended wife being given to another man, then sleeping with all sorts of prostitutes and taking revenge on them in some similar ways.

What more should I say of David? There was the little incident of the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah.

What more should I say of Jephthah? That he killed his young daughter, having made a vow to sacrifice to God the first thing he saw on coming home victorious in battle, thinking God would be pleased by such a thing.

Yeah, these “great heroes” were not perfect in life or in faith. Paul actually says that, in verse 40, “so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect,” therefore acknowledging their imperfection.

Which gives a slightly different cast to calling them a “great cloud of witnesses” to those trying to follow Jesus. They did not live lives fully faithful to God, and they are watching **us** to see what happens as **we** run the race, “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Can we do what they could not?

I don't know if you heard President Obama's eulogy for John Lewis last week. In it, he referred to the statement in the Constitution that the purpose of forming the original government of the US was to “form a more perfect union,” thus acknowledging that the union that existed then was not perfect, for sure. President Obama said this: “And some day when we do finish that long journey towards freedom, when we do form a more perfect union, whether it's years from now or decades or even if it takes another two centuries, John Lewis will be a founding father of that fuller, fairer, better America.” Lewis is one of the cloud of witnesses today, watching to see how

we are doing at forming that more perfect union. And we have a ways to go.

Same with these ancestors here. They are in the presence of God, and so their lives in all the fullness of sin and success, have been laid bare to them. They know their imperfections and how those flaws hurt the society they hoped to create. One can imagine them standing on tiptoe in anticipation of how **we** will form a more perfect church and a more perfect society. Will **we** “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and run the race with perseverance?” Will **we** do better than they did? Will **we** be courageous enough not to live again the wrenching pain of their past mistakes? The cloud of witnesses is waiting to see.

So, when you look into this burying ground, or any cemetery for that matter, don't look with sadness or indifference. Imagine the disappointment of the ancestors when they see us making the same mistakes they did. But also, imagine the excitement of the ancestors as they see us moving even a little bit closer to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, so great a cloud of hope. Take courage, beloved, God is not done with us yet. Amen.