

“Bridges Over Time”

- I. Introduction: Covered Bridges. When we lived in the Midwest we would on occasion take day trips into rural Indiana counties, particularly in the fall when the leaves were changing colors. There is a peacefulness and a serenity about the sun-filled days when the leaves are changing, such as they are along Ascension's entrance way. It is no longer summer, but the days are often still warm and inviting. One of our favorite day trips was to Parke County, Indiana, where there are a number of old, covered wooden bridges – 31 to be exact. Prominently inscribed on each bridge, usually over the entrance, was the year the bridge had been built – 1864, 1868, 1873. What amazed me about those bridges is how well they had been constructed. Their designers and builders no doubt intended them to last for generations.

- II. All Saints Day is a wonderful time for us to think of the many bridges across generations that link us with other Christians throughout time. It is good to remember today that each follower of Jesus Christ is called to be a saint, that is to be faithful to the Gospel and to make sacrifices, in his or her own time. Recognizing that we are part of the whole Communion of Saints places us today in context -- in relationship with those who have come before us, with those who are now living, and with those who will follow us. Within our own congregation are several generations of saints, each representing one link in a long chain of believers that began when the Christian church was founded and that continues on at this very moment. And we, you and I, are each serving as a bridge between the past and future generations. What is it like for us spanning this point in time? What is our challenge and how will we be remembered? Several guidelines emerge for me as we consider this question.
 - A. First, I believe that each of our generations is responsible for demonstrating that the Gospel can respond to the unique challenges and opportunities that exist during its lifetime. For example, Christians of my parents' generation were challenged to show how they could respond to massive political evil such as Nazism and other forms of violent oppression. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and countless other martyred saints met this challenge. At the same time, it was difficult for post-World War II Europe to remain rooted in Christianity after it had experienced massive devastation. There was the challenge of falling into despair. The work of C.S. Lewis provided an avenue for people to re-engage in Christian discussion and belief and to bring hope out of doubt. In spite of the work of Lewis and others, Christianity, however, has continued to decline in importance and vitality in the western world.

In my generation, Christianity has often been challenged as being intellectually weak and outmoded for the bright and sophisticated. I have lived through a period of time when the appeal of Christianity for many in the west has faded and sometimes been replaced by a broad range of alternative, human-centered philosophies. However, many have dedicated themselves to presenting Christianity in compelling and intellectually rigorous ways, also emphasizing its relevance to our current lives. For example, N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and a well-known Christian author; Nicky Gumbel, the son of a German Jew who was an atheist who converted to Christianity while in college and later was ordained and provided leadership for the development of the Alpha Program; and Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who left full-time parish ministry and now teaches religion in rural northeast Georgia. She writes books that are an important resource to many in their Christian journeys. These are only three examples of saints who have taken on this challenge. They don't all agree, but what they do have in common is passion and discipline about their faith.

- B. I also believe one of the primary challenges for each generation is to personally, repeatedly, and convincingly transmit the Gospel story to the next generations. Our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren must be familiar with the specifics of the story – they must know the story well enough to tell it to their own children without forgetting key parts. And when the Gospel story is told, it must be clear how our own lives have been impacted and transformed by the Gospel. This is the only way future generations can take in and own the Gospel story well enough to apply it to their own particular generational challenges.

One example of the way I received and was transformed by the Gospel story through my parents' generation is illustrated by this long row of perfect attendance Sunday School pins. When I was growing up, Sunday was the Lord's Day, and we went to Sunday School whether we were at home or on vacation. When one had no more than a few excused absences over a year, one received a perfect attendance pin, with a new bar for each additional year. At the time my father died, I received his row of pins, symbolizing 12 years of perfect Sunday School attendance as a youth at Christ Methodist Church in New Jersey. My father not only was faithful during his early years in church attendance, but he insisted that I do the same. This molded my steadfast belief in the importance of Christian education and of knowing the Gospel story. My father also made the Gospel story come alive when I watched him visit his friend John who worked with him at the Bell Telephone Company. My father visited every day for months at John's home as John was dying from cancer. He took me with him on some of these visits. I can picture the details of the room as I'm sharing this with you. My steadfast belief in the importance of lay ministry was shaped by an understanding of the meaning of these visits both to my father's friend and to my father. In some deep way, I knew,

even as a child, that my father was living out the Gospel in these visits. Yet, my father would be stunned that I would think of him as a saint . . . but a saint he was.

- III. The saints of past generations have given us many gifts. Perhaps the most important have been their models of faithfulness and sacrifice. John refers to this in today's reading from Revelation, where he describes the saints as a "great multitude that no one could count . . . who came out of the great ordeal . . . and [who] worship [God] day and night." They are at peace because "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Through the many descriptions of the lives of the saints in scripture, we know that there is hope for the future, no matter what happens to us, and that we truly do not need to be afraid.

At the Church of the Ascension, there are many ways in which we are reminded of the faithfulness and sacrifice of the saints. In addition to reading about their lives in scripture, the upper row of clerestory stained glass windows in the sanctuary remind us of the faithfulness and sacrifice of thirteen saints, including the blessed Julian of Norwich, St. Joseph of Arimathea, St. Patrick, St. Claire, and St. Francis. When we gather together in this sanctuary, we are surrounded by reminders of the saints who have gone before. But we are also surrounded by saints in the pews, some of whom will soon also be remembered and honored in our new Martha window planned for the sacristy. This window will remind us of the day-to-day faithfulness of past and present members of the Altar Guild, Flower Guild, and Wedding Guild, those who made the needlepoint kneelers, and the many other Marthas in our midst. You see both the past and present Christian saints have shaped and are still shaping each of our Christian journeys. This is a shared endeavor!

Each generation of saints provides a bridge between the generations that came before and the generations that will follow. Each generation is challenged by the context of its culture and history. Each generation is called to personally, repeatedly, and convincingly transmit the Gospel story to the next. We are inextricably bound together over time as a part of the communion of saints. May it ever be so here at Church of the Ascension. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*