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Sermon of November 4, 2007 Dr. Jim Standiford

“A SPACIOUS PLACE OF FAITH: 2. EXPANSIVE LOVE”

Habakkuk 1:2-4, 2:1-4 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Eternal God, we pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done in each of our lives, as well as in all your earth. Amen.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said that if Christians wanted him to believe in Jesus, they needed to start looking “more resurrected.” Phyllis Orr, of Trinity United Methodist Church in Annapolis, Maryland, is doing just that. Orr is 81 years old and a drummer in the church’s praise band. She is a retired school teacher who learned to play the drums 70 years ago in an orchestra, rather than marching band, because girls in those days weren’t allowed to wear pants. However, she spent last spring and summer being deceased. She discovered her condition in April when she went to fill a prescription. The pharmacist said, “She kept coming up dead on the computer.” It seems someone at the Social Security Administration mistakenly caused her to die legally. When one is declared dead by the government, credit cards are cancelled, Social Security payments are cut off, and prescriptions can’t be filled. Phyllis said, “I felt like I was on the other side of a two-way mirror. I was yelling ‘I’m still here,’ but no one seemed to hear me. It was nerve-racking. Every time I went to the mailbox, I got something else telling me I’m dead.” Her pastor, David Wentz brags about her, “It’s not every pastor whose church has a resurrected octogenarian laying down the beat on Sunday mornings.”

In some traditions individuals have to be dead for a stated period of time before they can be considered for sainthood. Some people believe saints are those who lived without committing any sin. However, if you read the salutations in Paul’s letters in the New Testament, it is clear he speaks of living members of the church as saints, or as those called to be saints. As we wrote in the Outlook this week, “A saint is one whom, no matter how limited, the power of God shows through.” Phyllis Orr sounds like a saint to me.

What do we mean when we say the power of God shows through a person?

The Hebrew prophet Habakkuk wrote to the people of Judah in a time not long before the Exile. We don’t know if they had track and field events or marathons then, but at the least they may have been aware of such activities. In this time of dis-ease perhaps athletic events were helpful diversions. Observing the events of his day Habakkuk asks why the ruthless

overcome the righteous, why evil triumphs over good, why the godly are victims of the godless. In every age, real world politics appear to be continually at odds with the prophets' passion for justice and God's just rule. The challenge of believing in the ultimate power of justice in a world that appears to be overwhelmingly unjust is one of the most difficult existential struggles the religious person must face in any time.

God then gives Habakkuk a promise in the form of a vision. God says to write it large, perhaps similar to those huge advertisements on the fences at sporting events. A long-standing translation states, "Write it so a runner can read it." A better translation does not refer to sports at all. It is based on Jeremiah 23:21 where it states the prophets ran to deliver their messages. So this verse reads, "Make it plain so a herald, or prophet, may run with it." In other words, so they can spread the message far and wide. **The message to be spread is "the righteous live by faith." By this word God is calling the people to faithfulness regardless of the outward circumstances of their lives.** This call, to trust in God regardless of what is going on around us, is the call to every age and to every individual. We are to trust God no matter what. It is a great message for times of distress and turmoil. It is the way the power of God shows through people's lives.

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It is the apostle Paul who made famous the phrase, "The righteous live by faith." We discover it is original with the prophet Habakkuk. Isn't that the way it always is. The person with the better marketing plan gets all the credit while the real author languishes in the recesses of the Hebrew scrolls.

In our New Testament passage today, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians for two reasons. Their faith is growing abundantly and their love for everyone is increasing. These are both signs of a healthy religious community. These are ways the power of God shows through in people's lives. People are taking responsibility for their own spiritual development. They are growing in their relationship with Christ, which by the way is a lifelong process. The love of Christ is having deeper and deeper impact on their lives. Their abundantly growing faith is manifested most obviously in their increasing love for others. Their righteous living, their trust in God, regardless of the other circumstances of life, is freeing them for more abundant expressions of love. It is not that they are exerting greater effort to love others; it is because of a deeper trust in God's love that they are energetically impelled toward greater love of those around them.

These qualities of deeper faith, greater trust in God, and expansive love for others, are witnessed in the lives of those we remember today. I wish I could speak about each one. It would be a great testament of God's faithfulness and work in human life. However, let me lift up just a few as representative of the whole group. One quality is boldly evident in all these lives; regardless of their circumstances their faith was a faith of joyful trust in God.

It was a factor of the times that many of these people started out life in very humble, some almost hardship circumstances. It was only many years later that they realized such was their case.

Norman Rudolph was born on a subsistence farm. From early in his life he loved to hunt pheasant. After moving to California judges and doctors often took Norm hunting. An excellent shot; he would sit on the front fender of their cars and bag their limits for them. He was a consummate machinist in the aerospace industry, a woodworker, and grew macadamia nuts. Norm had a deep faith and was a lifelong student. He had a winsome smile, a joyful nature, an even-tempered disposition, and a kind word for everyone.

John Wyle was the son of a ballet instructor mother and a violinist father. His love of music and art came naturally. He was a careful listener, and a positive spirit. Always one with a ready smile, often when asked how he was, he would respond, "Better now that I have seen you." John was compassionate and very generous.

Florence Carlson rode a horse to school in South Dakota, often taking a potato with her, which she put in the school's pot bellied stove to warm for her lunch. She and her family were part of the moving brigade that brought this church here to Mission Valley from downtown. She had a strong, positive faith, which she drew from many sources. She freely shared her wonderful smile and her bright eyes spoke of a lively and loving spirit inside. I called her "Smiley."

Paul Henderson was one of those people filled with joy – deep, wonderfully contagious joy, joy freely shared with others. His joy was because of his relationship with Christ. A son of a Methodist minister, he grew up moving frequently in Kansas. He possessed wonderful musical gifts, played the violin, and directed church choirs. He was a gentle and refined man, very generous, always thinking of the other person. He never said anything mean about anyone, except maybe the Raiders. He loved life, laughter, his wife Margaret, their daughters, and Jesus.

There were two couples who died from our midst this past year. The first was **Kay and Fielding West**. Kay used to introduce herself: "My name is not Mae West, nor Key West, it's Kay West." She was sparkling, feisty, gracious, and talented in so many and such diverse ways. Fielding was a retired military pilot, refined, and dignified. A man of dedicated service he had great love for our country. Not too long before his death, someone said to him, "Death is as beautiful as birth." He held up his hand to stop them and said, "One step at a time. Let's not get ahead of ourselves here." He had a wonderful sense of humor.

The other couple was **W.T. and Gwen Myers**. W. T. was born in Hannibal, Missouri. He was a man of very deep faith, who taught Sunday school for over sixty years, washed dishes at church (that's how he met Gwen), was committed to missions, and his own selfless service. He was very frugal, saving everything. He was extremely generous and forward-looking, giving to others especially for their education. A man of few words, if you waited long enough you were always blessed with deep wisdom and frequently a bit of humor. Gwen was born in Canada and while quite young moved frequently due to family circumstances. Life was never easy for her. She worked hard but found great joy in her love of Christ, family, and everyone around her. She found good in everyone. She was a very talented musician, singing for many years in our Chancel Choir, led the children's choirs and was thoroughly devoted to missions. When in the ICU just before her death she said, "I need to get out of here, I have better things to do."

There are two pastors in our list of saints this year, **Jordan Detzer** and **Earl Kernahan**. These two were very different people but both well beloved pastors, great family men, and strong voices calling all of us to live the gospel each day.

The writer of Hebrews (12:1) reminds us that we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." All of these persons are present with us in spirit today. They are witnesses to expansive love. Following their examples may we know new and spacious places of faith in our own lives. May we live expansive love.

Thanks be to God for all the saints.*

*Note: I am grateful to my colleague Molly Vetter for the story about Phyllis Orr.

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