

“Spread the Good News: You Are Not Alone”  
Hebrews 12:1-2

There is a story about the late professor and storyteller Fred Craddock about a time he revisited his childhood church in west Tennessee. He said, “on a Sunday evening, I went with a friend to worship. There weren’t many people there, but I noticed the small church had new leaded glass windows, beautiful windows, and I calculated, expensive windows. While I wondered how they could afford it, I began to read the names, the dedications in the windows. I didn’t recognize any of the names and I was reared there. I said to my friend, ‘Are these new people who have come in?’ He said, ‘No, a church in St. Louis ordered these windows from Italy, and when they got them, they didn’t fit. They advertised in a church paper that they would sell them because they were going to have new ones made. They were so cheap we bought them.’ And I said, ‘Well, they sure are beautiful, but what are you going to do about the plaques?’ He said, ‘Well, the board discussed that, and we decided to leave those names up there. It’s good for us in our little church to realize that there are some Christian people besides us.’ ”

This is the sentiment of our worship today. We are never alone. We may feel alone or isolated at times, but the spiritual and eternal reality of our lives is that we are connected to God, to creation, to others both in this life and in the life to come. This is part of the goodness of God’s creation in and through us.

One of the greatest pieces of hope and love in our faith is that this connection we share is eternal. We are connected to others who are here on this side of eternity and to others on the other side.

This was part of the good news which the letter to the Hebrews was trying to lift up for a group of discouraged followers of Jesus. At first, they were excited about following Jesus and showed great commitment, but as time went on, they felt disconnected. The struggles of the world, the division between the followers of Jesus and the other Jews, persecution and imprisonment, were some of the challenges they were facing. This was a time when the followers of Jesus were paying a heavy cost for their faithfulness to the way of Jesus, which made them weary.

In chapter 11, the author of the letter offers encouragement to these dispirited Christians by reminding them of their connection to the great heroes of the faith such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Rahab who all suffered but remained faithful.

In chapter 12, the writer gave them a beautiful image so that they may see their lives from an eternal perspective. This was a powerful reminder that they were not alone. Let’s listen to Hebrews 12:1-2

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

We live in a culture that oftentimes makes us feel alone because of the focus on the individual. But these words of faith remind us that we are never alone and that we don't have to find our way through the struggles of life alone. We can follow the examples of those who model love and goodness for us.

In their book *Made for Goodness*, Desmond and Mpho Tutu offer a beautiful image for us from their African culture. It is Ubuntu, which “recognizes the interconnectedness of life. My humanity, we say, is bound up with your humanity.”

Here is Desmond Tutu speaking about this powerful image of Ubuntu:

<https://youtu.be/44xbZ8MN1uk>

This is such good news for us today! Imagine the world today if we truly believed that we are interconnected and that all our flourishing is mutual, as Robin Kimmerer puts it. We need to repeat this message so that this illusion of separation can begin to fall away! We need to open our eyes to experience this message so that its power can move us beyond our current predicaments of fear, violence, and anxiety.

One of the great ways of doing this is by remembering our loved ones who live now in God's presence. Even death does not separate us from them. When we open our eyes, we can see the imprint of their presence on our lives and our world. When we pay attention to small signs of connection, the veil between this world and the eternal world begins to thin. Instead of being afraid of ghosts as a lot of movies and popular fiction try to lead us, we are invited to look at the spirits of those who have gone before us as guides and supporters for us on this path.

Today we are remembering the lives of our loved ones who moved from this life to more life in 2023. Today we remember their impact on our lives, but we also affirm that their light and their love is also a part of us now. We are not alone! We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We are here because they have been and will continue to be a part of us.

We will take a few moments to pray together with the invitation to connect to the spirit and love of loved ones who are part of that great cloud of witnesses. I will invite you to let the Holy Spirit bring someone from our list today or someone from your past who is part of the cloud of witnesses to come to your mind and heart. Take a few deep breaths and let the Spirit bring to your attention someone who was part of your life in the past

year or years. As you become aware of their name or presence, allow yourself to be immersed in their love. Let them gently give you a message of encouragement for your journey today. Give thanks to God for their presence in your life.

We will end with this song by Jan Philips: Like Candles in the Night

<https://youtu.be/rXakEhDq6Z8>

Like Candles in the Night

We miss you since you left us though we're glad you've been set free the light of you is still around it's right here in the breeze there's so much left to share with you we'll find another way to keep you in our hearts from day to day... Chorus: Your spirit's here beside us like candles in the night so take your wings and fly into the light (2X) You had your share of pain it never took you by surprise you bore it like a warrior though you cried behind your eyes we watched you brave the darkness while you prayed for brighter days and now you're gone...we bless you on your way Your spirit's here beside us like candles in the night so take your wings and fly into the light (2X) Everywhere you went you scattered kindness and delight if ever you encountered wrong you turned it into right the music of your life will be forever in our ears the symphony of you will last for years. Amen.