

**Honouring Our Heritage – The Cloud of Witnesses**  
**Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**  
**In Memoriam Sunday, Nov. 26, 2023, NPMC**

**Scripture:** *Hebrews 12:1-2a (NRSV): “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.”*

**Hymns:** *Nothing Is Lost on the Breath of God - VT 653; My Life Flows On – VT 605*

Today is In Memoriam Sunday, also known as Memorial Sunday or Eternity Sunday. It is the final Sunday of the church calendar, and a time to look back at the past year and to name and remember the loved ones who have recently left our midst, and yet who remain a part of us.

In traditional theological language, we speak of those who have died as belonging to the Communion of Saints or the “great cloud of witnesses” which surround us. This means that those who have died and those of us who are still living belong to one community and remain connected. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson describes the communion of saints this way: “If living persons share in the life of God, and if the dead are likewise still clasped by the living God, then both the living and the dead are united to each other, forged into one community by the same vivifying [life-giving] Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> God’s loving Spirit of Life thus holds all of us together in community, even across the distance of death. Or, as Dorothee Soelle puts it, “Death is not excluded from love, and death excludes no one from love.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 311.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 288.

We also are not alone because, as the apostle Paul says in our Scripture from Hebrews 12, “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” In maybe the most famous sports analogy of the whole Bible, Paul compares our forbears in faith, our spiritual and literal ancestors, to a crowd cheering on the runners of a race. With the encouragement of that cloud of witnesses, we are empowered to run with “perseverance” – to follow Jesus who is the “pioneer” of our faith, who gives us strength for the journey.

An interesting aspect of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is that we don’t necessarily remember saints as central to our particular “cloud of witnesses.” Rather, we trace our spiritual witnesses back to the martyrs, as reflected in the central place the *Martyrs Mirror* has had for many generations of Mennonites. These stories of those persecuted and killed for being Anabaptists have been passed down since the 1500s as examples of unwavering faith. The word martyr literally means “witness,” so in a way, these early Anabaptist martyrs are held up as faith heroes whose witness remained strong even in terrifying circumstances. But there is a sense in which remembering martyrs this way – as superhuman, as “gladly” going to their deaths with no fear – affects those of us who remember them in harmful ways. Should the point of our faith be to allow ourselves to suffer, or even to seek it out as some kind of badge of faithfulness? Can we remember the martyrs as human beings, mourning the tragedy and trauma of their violent deaths rather than glorifying it? As poet Audrey Poetker-Thiessen wonders, “Out of so many martyrs, how do we live?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kirsten Eve Beachy, ed., “Introduction,” in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyr’s Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2010), 23. For more of this discussion, see my upcoming article on martyrs in *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* (Spring 2024): <https://www.ambs.edu/vision-a-journal-for-church-and-theology/>

I find it interesting to note that the most famous early Anabaptist martyr, Dirk Willems, is primarily remembered for something he did, not for how he died. His page in the *Martyrs Mirror* does not depict him being burnt at the stake, but his act of saving his pursuer when he was attempting to escape from jail. This speaks to a remembrance of Dirk's life and agency – including a struggle to escape the violence – rather than sole focus on his death.<sup>4</sup> Anneken Jans's story similarly includes a letter she left for her baby son, outlining the core beliefs and practices of her Anabaptist faith. She wrote, "Honour the Lord in the works of your hands, and let the light of the Gospel shine through you. Love your neighbour. Deal with an open, warm heart thy bread to the hungry. Clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything twofold; for there are always some who lack."<sup>5</sup> She called her son not primarily to die, but to live – simply, generously, and faithfully. So the martyrs' tortured deaths also aren't the only thing we remember about them – instead, we remember the lives of faith they were able to lead before they were snuffed out. That is what encourages us from their stories as part of our "cloud of witnesses," the crowd that gathers invisibly around us, cheering us on.

In their day, Jesus' friends and disciples, too, learned about the true depth of God's life-giving power as they met the risen Jesus on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24). Not able to grasp the true meaning of the moment, they did not recognize Jesus in the stranger who joined them on their journey, even though their hearts burned within them as they spoke with him. It was not until they had gathered around a table together and he blessed and broke bread for them that they perceived the presence of Christ among

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<sup>4</sup> For alternative readings of the Dirk Willems story, see: Lisa Schirch, "Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 361-384; Kimberly D. Schmidt, "Run, Dirk, Run! Wrestling with the Willems Story," in *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches*, ed. Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2022), 238-249.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Loewen Reimer, ed., *Christians Courageous: Stories for Children from Church History* (Waterloo: Mennonite Publishing House, 1988), 39.

them. It was then that they glimpsed the power of God to bring life from death, and the reality that those who put Jesus to death did not succeed in doing away with him.<sup>6</sup> He was with his friends and loved ones still.

So today, as we have taken the time to name our loved ones who have gone before us and yet are still with us, surrounding us like a cloud, in ongoing communion with us. They too join us here at God's table today, for they are not forgotten but are held forever in "the unimaginable, life-giving embrace of the living God."<sup>7</sup> AMEN

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1990), 132.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 313.