

November 3, 2013
All Saints Day

Friday Night at Mollenkopf
Hebrews 12:1-3

Opening words: November 1 is All Saint's Day. It is a holiday that can be traced back to May 13, 609. For it was on that day that Pope Boniface IV created the holiday to remember all the martyrs of the church. The rest is history. Within the tradition of the United Methodist Church, saints are defined as anyone who believes, both the living and the dead. It is observed annually on the first Sunday of November. This is the first Sunday of November, and we are remembering the eleven church members who have died between November 1, 2012 and October 31, 2013. Over that twelve month period Western Reserve has welcomed sixteen new members.

This morning we are instructed from two scripture lessons. Both are from the epistles. Remember, epistles are nothing more than letters written by apostles. The first is written by the apostle Paul. The second is written by John. Both are written not to a certain individual or church. They are written to the Christian population in general. However, both help us remember our loved ones. May God give you ears to hear both lessons, Hebrews 12:1-3 and 1 John 3:1-3. Let me call this message *Friday Night at Mollenkopf*.

Hebrews 12:1-3 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

1 John 3:1-3 ¹ See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

I was disappointed. My normal Friday night routine during the high school football season is to sit in Warren's Mollenkopf Stadium. It is the home of the Harding Raiders. This week's game was canceled because of all the tension within the city. I was disappointed because I wanted to go one more time. I will be honest with you.

Mollenkopf is a sacred place in my life. In my life, I have visited some of the greatest stadiums in the world but they all take a backseat to Mollenkopf. In May, Kathryn and I went to Boston's Fenway Park, home of the World Champion Red Sox. Several years ago, I toured Rome's Coliseum, the most famous stadium in history. I have seen Olympic Stadium in Moscow several times. That is the stadium that hosted the 1980 Olympics games, where no Americans were present. In August, I visited the stadium in Kiev that hosted the last World Cup championship. Each one of those stadiums is special in their own way, but none equals 75 year-old Mollenkopf Stadium. It has a special place in my heart. The reason is personal.

I have been going to Mollenkopf since 1965. It was named after a school administrator from another generation. I loved it from the very beginning. The first game I remember attending was against Canton McKinley. One of the greatest players ever to play in Warren, Tony Capers, kicked a last-second field goal to beat McKinley, 9-8. He went on to play at Notre Dame, and later, the Denver Broncos. I read his obituary several years ago.

It is hard to believe that 48 years have passed since that historic kick. Just think what has happened to Warren and the stadium over that time period. The city itself has grown smaller. When I was young, Warren had a population of nearly 70,000. Today, Warren's population is less than 43,000. The two Warren high schools are gone. The old Harding is gone. The red and white Panthers gave way to the black and gold Raiders. Several years ago, they added turf, replacing the mud. Half way through this year, they got a new scoreboard and installed a statue of Paul Warfield, another Harding great from the past. Yet, none of those reasons is why I go back.

Do you know why I go back? I do not go back to support the team. This year's team was really disappointing. The Raider Nation had such hopes. The Raiders finished at 4 and 5. They underachieved in every facet of the game. It was disappointing, but I do not just go back to support the team. I do not go back because I see old friends. I haven't seen a familiar face in years. Everyone in my age group is gone. They needed a job. I do not go back because of the scenery. Warren is, and always will be, an old mill town. For years, I was not sure why I went back. Yet, every year I sit in Mollenkopf Stadium alone, wearing my Harding Raiders hoodie. Please don't ask to come with me. The company of other people almost ruins it. This year it hit me. I go back for two reasons.

First, I go back to rest. I consider myself an extrovert, but there are times I grow tired of people. Have you ever grown tired of people? It does not mean you don't love them or you don't care. It does not mean I don't care about you. Yet, there are times in my life when I am tired of being needed. When I go to Mollenkopf, no one needs me. They don't care if I live or die. I know where everything is and the evening is inexpensive. I buy my \$6 general admission ticket. I buy my \$5 meal. I find a seat next to no one and don't utter a single word during the evening. Everyone around me ignores me.

How could it be any better? I know Warren is just a few miles north of here, but I feel a million miles away. Most people from here are afraid to go into Warren because they watch the local news. I go to watch the Raiders and rest.

Second, I go back to reconnect. I just don't watch the game. I think about the past. Annually, I try to answer that question, where did they all go? I am the last one. Everyone in my life used to go to Mollenkopf on Friday night, but they are all gone now. I think about my high school classmates who moved away years ago. I have no contact with them. I think about my high school teachers and wonder if they are still alive. I think about my closest high school friends. We once did everything together, but we haven't communicated in years. I think about my sisters. They used to march in the Harding band. They are still recovering. They left the Mahoning Valley years ago. I think about my parents. They never liked football, so they hated sitting in Mollenkopf. They only came to support my sisters, and left after the halftime show. They are both gone and I am part of the older generation. I wonder if my dad is proud of me yet. I doubt it. I think about all those people and I wonder how everything changed? After Friday night, I am wondering if things have changed too much. The only thing that has stayed the same is Friday night high school football at Mollenkopf Stadium.

Can I ask you these two questions? Where do you go to rest? Where do you go to reconnect? Where is that sacred place in your life that keeps drawing you back? I think everyone needs a Mollenkopf Stadium in their life, a place to rest and a place to reconnect. Where is your Mollenkopf? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We are instructed today from the epistle to the Hebrews. Tradition tells us Paul is the author. He was writing to first century Jewish Christians, who were well schooled in Old Testament theology. For this reason it is difficult for us to understand. After all, we are twenty-first century Christians, who know very little about Old Testament theology. All we need to know is Jesus. However, what links us to them is life itself. Life has always been hard. There is no other way to say it. The great evangelist is writing this letter to this first century Jewish congregation, which is resigning from the Christian faith.

The question that haunts this epistle is this one: *why are they leaving?* They are not resigning from the faith because of persecution or heresy. They are not resigning from the faith because the budget was too large or the building too old. They are not resigning because of some music issue, or they didn't like the style of worship. They are leaving for one reason. They are tired. They are tired of worshipping an all-powerful God who does nothing to eliminate their hardships. They are tired of good people dying young. They are tired of bad people profiting. They are tired of being part of an impotent church. They are tired, so they are resigning from the faith and walking away. Do you know of anyone who has resigned from the church? Do you know of anyone who has walked away? Listen to what I am about to say.

When they walked away from church, they didn't just walk away from a building or an organization. They are walking away from people. Sometimes, those people are still in this world; sometimes they are gone. In other words, they are part of Paul's great cloud of witnesses. Today, we remembered eleven of those people. They are not just names, they were people. They were fellow church members. Just think about that for a moment. They once worshipped with you. They once prayed with you. They once prayed for you and you prayed for them. They weren't just another giving unit during the financial drive. They were people who sacrificed for this church. This church was important to them because Jesus was important to them. When people drop out of church, they are walking away from people. How can you walk away from them? How can you forget them? How do you selfishly move forward without remembering them? How do you resign from church? It would be like me staying home on a football night and not going back to Mollenkopf Stadium. I just can't do it and neither can you. We must reconnect with them. Let me go one step farther.

If you had the opportunity to speak to this great cloud of witnesses, what would you say? Would anyone here say, "I love you?" Would anyone here say, "I miss you?" Would anyone here ask about heaven? Would anyone here ask about Jesus or God? Would anyone here ask, "Why did you leave so soon?" Perhaps, this is a better question.

If the people who comprise the great cloud of witnesses had the opportunity to speak to you, what would they say? I believe some would say, "I love you." I believe, some would say, "I miss you." However, what I really believe they would say are encouraging words. They would tell us not to compromise the faith. Don't compromise your church. Keep working at it. Be the person God intended you to be from the very beginning. Build the church that God intended from the beginning. Don't walk away! Build a purer church so more can experience the perfection of heaven. I believe they would say words like John said in the second epistle lesson for today. What is John saying to encourage us? Let me look at these things very quickly.

First, John encourages us by reminding us, **what we are**. We are Christians and as Christians we have a special relationship with God. 1 John 3:1 says, *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."* Does anyone here not want to feel special?

Second, John encourages us by reminding us **what we will be**. In other words, they are reminding us that someday we are going to be part of the great cloud of witnesses. Each one of us is terminal from birth. Even with all of our medical advances, someday you are going to die. We are going to see those bright lights of eternity and wonder why we wanted to stay in this world. 1 John 3:2 says, *"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known."*

But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." In other words, he is reminding them of the perfection of heaven, our future home.

Third and finally, John encourages us by reminding us **what we should be**. You know it is true. It is easy to be satisfied with your present state. You look good next to the rest of the world. Don't be satisfied. Strive to be better. Strive to be a little more like Jesus, every day. Are you practicing today what you will be doing in heaven for eternity? 1 John 3:3 says, *"All who have hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."*

John and the great cloud of witnesses is speaking to you! Are you going to listen? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

The high school football regular season is over. For the Warren Raiders there will be no play-offs or championship trophies. The team underachieved in every facet of the game. I will be honest. It is a hard pill to swallow. There was no game on Friday night, but I will return to Mollenkopf Stadium next year. How could I possibly stay home? After all, I have been spending my Friday there for a long time. I have seen the team and city change through the years. I am still proud to be from Warren. I have some wonderful memories, and I received a quality education. I am a proud member of the Raider Nation. I have no plans of walking away now. Next year, I will do what I have always done. I will buy my \$6 ticket and my \$5 meal. I will sit there alone and cheer for the Raiders. However, I'm not really alone. I will be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. There will be my high school friends who moved away. There will be my teachers who did their best. There be my sisters who left the Mahoning Valley. There will be my parents, who left this world. I will sit there at Mollenkopf and rest. I will sit at Mollenkopf Stadium and reconnect with my past. I can't walk away from Mollenkopf because it would be like walking away from them. Can I ask you two questions? Where do you go to rest? Where do you go to reconnect?

Have you ever considered going to the Communion table? At the Communion table, the spotlight is off you and on Jesus. At the Communion table, we are connected with Jesus and that great cloud of witnesses. As you come to the Communion table, who are you remembering?

Will you please pray with me?