

Saints Before Us

Hebrews 11

A bit over a month ago, one of the greatest baseball players ever died. Pete Rose will likely always hold the all-time Major League Baseball record with 4,256 hits and his on-field career was one of the greatest of all time. He also holds the all-time Major League record for games played (3,562), at-bats (14,053), singles (3,215), and outs (10,328). Despite all of that, he is not, nor will he ever be in the Hall of Fame. Why? Because he broke the baseball rule that you simply cannot break, betting on baseball games while actively a player and manager, and accepted a lifetime ban as a result.

Pete Rose isn't the only one who is banned from the Hall of Fame. Here in Iowa, we're all familiar with Shoeless Joe Jackson and the rest of the Black Sox who were banned for purposely losing the 1919 World Series, because of their connection to the Field of Dreams. Sammy Sosa and Mark McGuire among others haven't made the Hall of Fame due to their use of steroids. Others may have been good players, but weren't great enough or popular enough to make the Hall of Fame.

Today's epistle reading from Hebrews 11 is sometimes referred to as the Hall of Fame of the Bible, or the Hall of Faith, because it is a collection of famous heroes from the Old Testament, giving those examples of what it means to live by faith. It focuses on Abraham and Moses, but mentions Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Rahab, David, and more. But unlike the Baseball Hall of Fame or any other Hall of Fame, where you have to accomplish something to win stardom and earn your place among the forever famous, one's place in the Hall of Faith is not based on what you do, but rather on what is done to you and through you by God's grace. You don't need to

break the single season home-run record to get into the Hall of Faith. The people listed, however, made the hall of faith despite their failings.

And that's why we need to remember them, the saints who went before us. It's one thing to look at their stories in the Old Testament, it's another to see how they're commended and remembered in the New Testament. When we look through the Bible, we see that even the ones who we hold up as examples have doubts and struggles. Abraham, who becomes a pivotal figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, struggles and doubts God. He pretends that his wife is his sister to save his life; he bargains with God, but not enough to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah; and he doubts that he will have a son in his old age, even after God promises that there will be one. King David, called a man after God's own heart, breaks almost every commandment during the Bathsheba incident, where he lies and kills in an attempt to cover up his adultery, and his other failures with his family lead to coups and rebellions and death.

It doesn't get any better in the New Testament. Of Jesus' disciples, Matthew cheats those who he collects taxes from and is a collaborator with the occupying Romans. Peter charges into situations without thinking, gets compared to Satan, and denies Jesus three times after swearing he'd never do such a thing. Thomas seems doomed to be forever remembered for his doubting. James and John spend more time arguing about who is better and which one of them should have the higher position than doing what they should. Judas becomes synonymous with betrayal. It seems more like a collection of sinners than a gathering of saints.

Even in the modern day, those we regard as saints struggle. Martin Luther struggled with his feelings of unworthiness throughout his life, and we struggle with how anti-Semitic some of his later writings are. Mother Theresa spent her life working with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, yet worried that she had no connection to God. The lives of those who claim to be saints in the modern day are deconstructed and demonized and put under such scrutiny that none can make the claim with much backing.

But just because people let us down, just because people fail to live up to our high expectations of them, doesn't mean that they can't be saints. St. Augustine perhaps coined it centuries ago but Oscar Wilde popularized it when he wrote: "The only difference between a saint and a sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future."

Today is All Saint's Day, when we remember those who have gone before us in faith and are now at rest. But when we think of saints, we usually don't think of ordinary people. When we think of saints, we think of people who had great faith, who lived holy lives, who faced great obstacles and persevered. But saints aren't just like that. Saints are people who struggle with faith and life, as well. We celebrate saints today, just as we remember those in the Hall of Faith, not because what they did made them holy, but because of what Jesus did made them holy.

G.K. Chesterton, a British writer who was a convert to Catholicism, while writing about Thomas Aquinas, wrote "Every saint is a man before he is a saint; and a saint may be made of every sort or kind of man." Being a saint isn't something people do for themselves or by themselves. It's something God does for them. It's something God does for all of us, calling us

to repentance and forgiving us when we confess them.

That's why we Confessional Lutherans confess under Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession, "Our churches teach that the history of saints may be set before us so that we may follow the example of their faith and good works, according to our calling."

Who is in your hall of faith? Who were the unknown, unnamed saints in your life? Maybe it's in the parents or grandparents who struggled and sacrificed to get you through school, through college, through starting out in life. Maybe it's the friend who sat with you through long, late night discussions about life and faith and helped you see God at work in your life. Maybe it's the professor who saw something in you that you didn't even see in yourself that led to a fruitful, fulfilling career. Maybe it's the example of faithfulness someone gave, just by waking up and going to church every Sunday.

It is homecoming, and that means that people have been gathering to remember their time at Iowa State, their time in Ames, and their time here at Memorial. Some of those remembrances are nostalgic, looking back at how much better things were in the old days, how many more people there were. Other remembrances are of who is gone, who isn't here. It reminds us that, like the saints before us in the hall of faith, we haven't yet received the things promised, but have seen them and greeted them from afar, that we still are strangers and exiles on earth, and will be until our life's journey ends.

We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. We know with all the saints who have looked to Christ, those who've gone before us in the faith, we see our crucified and risen Lord drawing near to meet us.

We remember the saints who went before us because they lived by faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah all lived and died by faith. So do we live “by faith.” Living by faith has a double meaning. We have eternal life because faith clings to God’s promises. But we also live by faith because faith is active in love and good works. Faith believes God’s promises, and faith obeys God’s Law.

Because Jesus died and rose again, you and I can live by faith. We shall die by faith. And someday we shall live again—forever—by faith! Your names are written in the book of life. Even though they weren’t mentioned in Hebrews 11, Peter, John, James, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Barnabas, Augustine, Athanasius, Martin Luther, and many others are already enrolled in the Hall of Faith. Your names will be written there too, with the saints who went before us, if you believe in Jesus’ name. God has a place for all of us in the Hall of Faith.

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