

Ninth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Living in Faith, Dying in Faith"
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40
August 9-10, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:34) Folks without much spiritual awareness only recognize "treasure" in the form of money itself or things that are worth a lot of money. An example would be the Roman Emperor Valerian who was in power in the mid-3rd century. In the year 257 he initiated a deadly persecution of Christians, especially clergy and wealthy laypeople. His henchmen discovered the pope and a number of deacons worshipping in secret in a Roman cemetery, and beheaded all of them. The story goes that Lawrence, one of seven deacons responsible for caring for the poor in Rome, was not with the group at the time of the massacre. He was the deacon who managed the church's treasury, including money used to provide food, clothing, shelter for the needy. A Roman prefect (high level administrator) demanded that Lawrence hand over the church's money at a certain time and place.

Lawrence showed up, but not with bags of money. He had gathered the very young, the very old, the very sick, and presented them to the prefect, saying, "These are the treasure of the church." The Roman official was not amused and had Lawrence executed. Since Lawrence was a Roman citizen, he was probably beheaded. But there **is** an alternate story that he was grilled to death, so if you see religious art of a man standing next to a grill, that's probably Lawrence you're looking at. He must have had a sense of humor, because that same tradition claims that at some point in his martyrdom he commented, "I am done on this side; turn me over."

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Lawrence's treasure was the Lord and the Lord's people. Death was not too high a price to pay for keeping the faith, living out his faith. Unlike the greedy farmer in last week's parable, Lawrence did **not** have spiritual myopia, spiritual short-sightedness. He could see beyond himself to his neighbor, and he could see beyond this life to the next. His day on our calendar of commemorations is this weekend, Sunday, August 10. He's a good example of the holy ones described in the letter to the Hebrews:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. (Hebrews 11:13)

Lawrence's death didn't diminish the truth of God's promises or the value of resurrection hope. He trusted that God is faithful to keeping all of God's promises.

Today's lesson from the letter to the Hebrews celebrates the **transforming** power of the gift of faith, primarily through the example of Abraham and Sarah, who conceived and welcomed a child in their nineties. Humanly speaking, biologically speaking, that was an impossibility. But as the angel said to Abram, *"Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"* (Genesis 18:14a) The archangel Gabriel will echo that when young Mary asks how she could possibly conceive a child, virgin that she is. Gabriel announces: *"...nothing will be impossible with God."* (Luke 1:37) Jesus will then hit that nail on the head again when He tells the disciples it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. They worry, *"Then who can be saved?"* Jesus answers, *"For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."* (Matthew 19:26) Faith is trust that God is faithful to keeping God's promises, in thick and thin! Lawrence trusted that the treasure of the Gospel was more valuable than his own life. He died in faith, without receiving the fruit of the promise, but from a distance he saw and greeted it.

This week we also celebrate the witness of other friends of Jesus who died in faith, directly as a result of seeing and serving Christ in their neighbor, laying down their lives as their Savior did. On Wednesday, August 13, we remember 2 nurses, Florence Nightingale and Clara Maas. Clara was born in East Orange, so I'm making an educated guess that she's our closest neighbor in the calendar of commemorations. She was born in 1876, America's centennial year, the oldest of 9 children of German immigrants. She trained at the Newark German Hospital, then signed up with the U.S. Army as a contract nurse. She served during the Spanish-American War stateside and in Cuba, where she cared for soldiers with malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever. More of the military died of yellow fever than in combat. She signed up for another year and went to the Philippines, where she developed a condition called breakbone and was sent back home. In the year 1900 she volunteered to participate in a yellow fever transmission study, and returned to Cuba. She died there at the age of 25 from a 2nd bout of yellow fever contracted as a study participant. *"No greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* (John 15:13) *"[She] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [she] saw and greeted them."*

On Thursday, August 14, we remember both Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan friar, and Kaj Munk, a Danish Lutheran pastor and playwright, both of whom were martyred during World War II. Friar Kolbe was imprisoned in Auschwitz after being arrested for his friary's publication of

anti-Nazi newsletters and offer of secret sanctuary to thousands of Polish refugees, most of whom were Jewish. In the concentration camp he gave away much of his meager rations, and eventually volunteered to take the place of another internee condemned to death by starvation. He substituted himself for the other man who pleaded for a stay of execution because he was a husband and father. After 2 weeks of starvation Kolbe was near death and killed by lethal injection. “[He] *died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [he] saw and greeted them.*” Pastor Kaj Munk was executed by the Gestapo after being arrested for preaching against Nazism and for writing plays that called Nazism out as anti-Christian. “[He] *died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance [he] saw and greeted them.*”

On Friday, August 15, we remember Mary, the Mother of our Lord, who has many titles, the most precious of which is Theotokos, the Godbearer. Martin Luther used that title for Mary, and honored her as the first one through whom the Word took flesh. Luther wrote that we are all to pray for grace to be Godbearers in our own time, in our own circle of influence. We are to bear God wherever we go, at whatever the cost.

The holy ones of whom I’ve just spoken didn’t shut themselves off from the world to draw closer to God. They were in the thick of life, seeing and serving Christ in the last, the lost, and the least, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, ministering to the lonely, calling out injustice, channeling Jesus’ healing touch, speaking Jesus’ prophetic words, participating in the coming of the Kingdom as God gave them opportunity, not letting an apparent lack of success stop them dead in their tracks, not allowing themselves to be paralyzed by the powers-that-be, trusting that God is faithful to keeping God’s promises, valuing heavenly over earthly treasure, seeing beyond this life to the next. *All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.* It was enough.

Hebrews 11 is a crash course on faith. Someone has summarized its lessons like this:

Faith is not simply belief that there is a God but trust that God “rewards those who seek him” (v. 6). Faith has a long memory and profits from the experiences of our forebears. Faith also hopes (v. 1), looking beyond the immediate to God’s future (vv. 10, 13, 26, 35, 40). Faith is tenacious and enduring, able to accept promises deferred in the conviction that death itself does not annul God’s promises (vv. 8-10, 13, 16, 29-40). Faith is not coerced; believers always have the option of returning to “the land that they left behind” (v. 15). Faith is courageous, acting often in the face of kingly edicts (v. 23) and royal fury (v. 27) Faith is

subjective, to be sure, a conviction firmly held (v. 1); but it is not solely subjective, since it is the substance, the essence, the very being of things hoped for (v. 1).¹

Amen.

¹*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 146.

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