



SINCE WE ARE SURROUNDED

September 30, 2018, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 11:1-3, 29-12:2

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Many churches have them, of course, a Gallery of past Ministers hanging on the wall—their portraits, I mean, or at least a professional photograph of each one as far back as that technology extends. Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta has 16 8x10 black and white photographs of its pastors...men from the 1860s and 1870s, looking as grim and as serious as the time in which they lived; including one who brought so many morality charges against his own members that his 10-year pastorate became known as the “Reign of Terror!” Captured forever are the pastors in the 1960s and 70s, looking as radical and hip as you might expect a Southern Presbyterian cleric to look in the unfortunate styles of that period. Brick Church, however, has chosen to continue its stately tradition of oil portraiture, lending a certain timelessness to each man.

Sandy Nairne, Director of the National Portrait Gallery in London, gave a lecture entitled, “Why do painted portraits still matter?” Nairne cites Thomas Carlyle, the historian and biographer who, in the 1840s said this, “...in all my historical investigations it has been one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage enquired after...the Portrait,” he said, “was a small lighted candle by which Biographies could for the first time be read, and some human interpretation be made of them.” Nairne believes that “The fast changing landscape of surveillance and the globalization of digital imagery calls for a counterpoint of intense, local imagery contained within a painting.” In a painted portrait, the possibilities of allegory and complex meaning are distinct: the symbolic realm can come to the fore.” She concludes, “The conveying of character in a painted portrait is specific and dynamic. There is a process described through paint [that a photograph cannot contain]...an intensity that gives a portrait its authority.”ⁱ



Going through the 11th chapter of Hebrews is like walking through just such a gallery of portraits...the famous and infamous are listed here in faith's long march through history. The chapter begins by reminding us that faith itself is the assurance of things hoped for; its substance is largely the conviction of things not seen. But what follows is a long and detailed list of very visible people indeed. Their names and deeds are recited as examples of those who kept the faith, ran the race set before them, always moving toward the homeland God had promised, even when it made them strangers and foreigners upon this earth.

Those included in this Gallery of Faith are the well known and expected, but there are a few surprises as well. In fact, the first name on the list is a bit of a surprise: Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain. Though there is not one recorded word from Abel in scripture, he is the first Biblical "great" and our text says that through his faith, Abel still speaks!ⁱⁱ Perhaps the world's first victim of violence is still crying out through the long centuries, to this very day, a swelling chorus joins in, larger than it should be, their voices with Abel's a steady crescendo insisting that justice roll down like waters, water from tears enough to fill an ocean. Next, old Enoch is swept up to God, then Noah swept out upon the waters. There is Abraham's portrait of faith, followed by Isaac's, with Jacob and Esau positioned uncomfortably next to each other on the next wall. Sarah receives a small cameo, but the plaque beneath notes neither her resilience nor her laughter, only the inability to bear children, the only measure of her worth in that culture.

Next is Moses, his portrait as large as Henry Van Dyke's on our third floor. Nearby is a faded pencil sketch of Pharaoh's daughter—she who rescued and raised Moses, held his little hand on the way to nursery school that first morning and every first day-of-school thereafter, but the plaque beneath bears not her name, nor even the designation "Mother of Moses." In this history, she will never be more than "Pharaoh's daughter." The people of Israel who passed through the Red Sea paused on dry ground for a group shot. Forty years down the road, just inside the Promised Land, someone painted a quick portrait of Rahab, another surprise in this



gallery. Her plaque does not say: “Hero who saved the spies of Israel,” but sums her up by only one word: “Prostitute.”

Not only in the pages of the Bible are women often unnamed or unnoticed. Church histories often do the same. Deane Turner went to heroic efforts in his magnum opus of the Brick Church history to list the women who were *not* painted into their husbands’ portraits here; nor their names engraved alongside their husbands’ on our marble plaques. Deane writes: “The histories tell us little of the minister’s wives... Even in the comparatively loquacious modern era we find little or nothing about [them.]” (Perhaps they were relieved, being under such scrutiny in their tenure.) But given the times we are in just now, I will speak their names this day: The second Mrs. Rodgers, her own name unknown to us; Susan Barney Spring, who gave birth to 15 children, which is heroic enough; Lucy Shedd, Julia Murray, Louisa Jane Bevan, Katherine Babcock, Charlotte Richards... “None,” Deane notes, “have penetrated the cloak of anonymity with which our church historians have shrouded them.” Ellen Reid Van Dyke being the exception, for she is at least described as “the vivid, elusive, devoted and in later years quite deaf wife of Henry Van Dyke...the love of his life and a good housekeeper and organizational genius, who shared his passion for Tennyson, fishing and camping.”

Clara Merrill, Helena Wolfe, Gwyneth Thomas, Rachel Stewart, Mary Lou Anderson,ⁱⁱⁱ and of course, the artistic Terri Lindvall who apparently wore, on occasion, red cowboy boots in these hallowed spaces.

There is more that I could say, of course, but time would fail me, as the writer of Hebrews puts it. So our pace quickens through the rest of the gallery, breezing past Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah—who deserves no portrait at all if you ask me—then David, Samuel, and the prophets gathered for a rather intense group pose. The Letter rounds out this Hall of Faith with a host of others unnamed who were painted, not in the dignity of a composed life, but painted in the chaotic and frightful scenes of their deaths in and for the faith: in chains, being flogged, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, persecuted and tormented. Thankfully, Michael, the ministers of Brick Church seem to fare much better after retirement.

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



Such a gallery of faith is, of course, meant to remind us of our past, to teach us of those who lived faithfully in the challenges of their time as we seek courage to run the race that is set before us in our day. We *need* their example and the encouragement we find as they remained faithful to God and followed Jesus, who is, as this letter puts it, both the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

But this passage makes a surprising announcement. It startles with an unusual turn of phrase and turn of perspective. Tom Long notices that the last verse of chapter 11 offers something unexpected. All of these heroes are commended for their faith, yet they did not receive what was promised in this life so that...and this is the startling part...so that they would not, *apart from us*, be made perfect!

We did not expect that, surrounded as we are. We can see how we need *them*. Their stories, their example. We can also see how they and we both need Jesus. But, Tom says, what staggers the imagination is the claim that these faithful of old somehow need *us*, that “apart from us” they will not be made perfect! Not that we save them...of course not, only Christ does that. What Tom sees in this way of putting things, is that the ministry of Jesus Christ establishes “a great unbroken cord of faith that stretches from the beginning of human history all the way into the heavenly City of God,” where Christ reigns. Salvation history forms “a chain of faithful people holding onto the cord and to each other.”^{iv}

Abel took his place, grasping the cord of salvation with both hands. Then Enoch stepped forward holding onto that cord, his hand overlapping Abel’s hand, then Noah grabbed hold, and Abraham and Sarah, and Moses, and Rahab, and Gardiner, and Clara, and Ellsworth, and Emily and Betsy...Why, time would fail me. Links are formed by faithful people, hand over hand, generation after generation, holding fast to each other and to ‘our confession.’ In this cord of faith Jesus makes us, together, perfect. There are gaps in the line and we are to step up to the cord and join with those who through the ages held on by faith. An enduring unbroken community of faith, where our ancestors would not “apart from us” be made perfect.^v And now it is our turn in our time. Even when we are tired, when the way

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



seems hard, when all is not fair or clear...we are to step into the gap, form the links, hand over hand, helping each other hold on, run a little farther, keep going, taking our children's hands and holding onto them, too, because apart from them and others yet unborn and those yet unknown to us, we will not be made perfect.

Today, a new portrait will be unveiled and added to those who were Ministers of the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York. Those who, in faith, led this congregation in their time ably and well. There is always a bit of a risk with a portrait, especially when the subject is very much alive. When Lyndon B. Johnson saw his official White House portrait by Peter Hurd, he declared it to be "the ugliest thing I ever saw," and he refused to accept it. Sir Winston Churchill's wife, Clementine, so hated her husband's portrait by Graham Sutherland that she had it taken out of their home in the dead of night by her private secretary, driven to a country house and burned far from the road. And people gasped at the official portrait of Barack Obama, surrounded as he was by bright green vines, lilies, chrysanthemums and jasmine in the contemporary style of artist, Kehinde Wiley.

Deane Turner's book was published in 2017, but his record of the Brick Church history stops with the years 2005-2006, and appropriately so. It takes some time and distance to properly assess an era. Time for facts to become a coherent and reflective narrative. Besides, Michael's biography is still very much in process! But there will be this portrait. And as Thomas Carlyle put it, this portrait will be, as much as Session minutes and people's memories, a small lighted candle by which someone might have a sense of who this pastor was in this place for that time...indeed who you are still, now captured for all time. Your hands holding onto the long cord of faith along with ours. Hand upon hand, linked in faith, all of us part of salvation's history, moving toward the homeland promised of God so long ago; as we follow Jesus Christ, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/20/why-do-painted-portraits-still-matter>

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, **Interpretation Series: Hebrews** (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 115-116.



ⁱⁱⁱ E. Deane Turner, **The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York: A Fellowship of Kindred Minds, Vol. II** (New York, 2017), 343-344.

^{iv} Long, 126-127.

^v Long, 128-129.