

A Great Cloud of Witnesses
Don Lincoln
Hebrews 12: 1-2

The last in our “Be The Church” series is “Care for the Poor.” And I thought what I’d do on All Saints Day would be to share vignettes of faithful saints – not the ones from centuries ago but folks from the last 100 years, who have exhibited the heart of each of our various themes – addressing impoverishment in a wider sense – whether poverty of resources, of power, of standing, of community.

When we start with care for the poor, how can you not think of Mother Theresa, who after teaching as a nun for 17 years in India, received her call within that call – to **care for the poor**. She established a hospice; centers for the blind, centers for the aged, centers for lepers and centers for the disabled – Theresa technically became a saint in 2016. TECHNICALLY. Her entire life was caring for the poor. She was a saint her entire life.

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his classic exploration of Christian community “**Life Together**” while teaching in an underground seminary during the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer’s last act before his execution in a prison camp was to remind his fellow prisoners they were community. He brought them together to share communion. He **built community** where it seemed there was none.

Since Bonhoeffer came to mind, it was an easy segue to the compassion of Saint Maximilian Kolbe – for whom the parish across 202 is named. Father Kolbe was a 47 year old Polish priest who volunteered to die in the place of a stranger in Auschwitz. Compassion shown for a stranger, whose poverty of circumstances gave him no place to turn until Father Kolbe lay down his life for this friend. “No greater love,” Jesus says.

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run the race that is set before us.

In my lifetime..... Martin Luther King Jr., a man whose non-violent approach to rejecting and dismantling racism began to change this nation for the better, and without his witness I believe this nation would be a far poorer land.

8 weeks ago, Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew – spiritual heads of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians (60% of Christianity in the world) – together wrote these words about protecting creation: “We offer thanks to the loving Creator for the noble gift of creation and pledge commitment to its care and preservation for the sake of future generations.” Saving and protecting the earth from greater impoverishment.

In 1940 Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist began hiring Jews in his factory in Poland because they were cheap labor. But as he saw what the Nazis were doing in the ghettos of Poland, his heart and mind were transformed. He began to share his industrialist abundance

to save his workers, buying their freedom from the camps. By the end of the war, Schindler had spent his entire fortune on bribes and black-market purchases of supplies for his workers, saving over 1,200 Jews whose poverty was position, power, and the fact they were Jewish.

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A little closer to home.... In 2006, 10 young school girls were gunned down in the one room Nickel Mines Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County. A number of the first responders were from the church in Strasburg where Pastor Jennie and her husband, Steve, were co-pastors. In the days following that horrendous event, the world witnessed **forgiving others**, lived out by the Amish Community. Instead of casting blame, pointing fingers, or holding press conferences, they reached out to the family of the shooter, 32 year old husband and father of three, Charles Roberts. Amish neighbors visited Roberts' wife, embraced her and comforted her children. Amish mourners outnumbered non-Amish at Roberts' funeral. The Amish took up a collection for Roberts' wife and children. And it was the Amish, who came to the home of Roberts' mother, who was convinced she would have to leave the community and be banished forever, and they convinced her not to move away – to stay in the community. From the poverty of shame and despair, forgiveness saved the Roberts family by the love of Christ.

Finally, as we talked about this message, Jon Frost reminded me of another saint – one who has stood in this chancel; one known by a hundred or more Westminster members, and perhaps thousands of children in Mexico. Debora Acosta, director of Estado 29 orphanage in Ensenada, who died in September just days after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Debora inherited the legacy of her father, himself an orphan who after being found by Jesus Christ, determined to do something about the number of children he saw on the street in northern Baja. He sold his business and started an orphanage in 1957.

In 1987 he became too ill to continue, and Debora, his daughter, took over, and spent the rest of her life **servicing neighbors** – children – whose poverty includes lack of family; lack of resources; lack of love; and the impoverishment of spirit that comes from such life. Listen to Pastor Jon's words as he pays tribute to this saint:

“Es su casa” Debora would say. This is your home. She said it to me my first time at the orphanage and she said it to countless visitors. She meant it. You became part of the family and the hospitality of that place, which originated from her, oozed out of every nook and cranny. Her sentences were always punctuated by “Gracias a Dios” – thanks be to God. Far more than an empty add-on, her life was so thoroughly characterized by gratitude to and dependence upon God for every gift.

When she prayed for our groups the night before leaving, you'd swear the mountains that surrounded the orphanage would move wherever she commanded. Her love for her family, which spanned generations of children, was fierce, powerful, and transformed many lives, including mine. She was one of the strongest women I've ever known.

Martin Luther once said that while we live we are all simultaneously saints and sinners. We are imperfect and messy, prone to doing many of the wrong things. And yet we are one and the same, beloved children of God, trying every day to get it just a little more right; children of God, alive by God's spirit and by the power of God's will – able to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the world. To do God's will.

Sisters and brothers, how do we become the church? Love God by sharing abundance, showing compassion, caring for the poor, serving neighbors, protecting creation, building community, rejecting racism, forgiving others. Being the saints God calls us to be, proclaiming in word and deed, "He is risen" and there is Good News is for all the world!

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let us run the race that is set before us. AMEN