Cloud of Witnesses
First Reading - Psalm 71:17-21
Second Reading - Hebrews 11:29

It is an image attributed to sources as divergent as Ralph Waldo Emerson, activist Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, and martial artist Bruce Lee — a single stone dropped into a pond creates ripples that spread across the pond; that individual pebble having an impact on the entire pond, much like every life (your life) has an impact on the world far greater than you realize.

You have probably heard the image used in commencement speeches, political rallies, youth groups, State of the Union addresses, Rom-coms, and the coach's pep talk before the T-ball game. It has been used so often that you have probably collected all manner of wise guy retorts — *A single stone cast upon the water … sinks to the bottom and is never seen again; if a single pebbles falls into a pond and no one sees it, did it really happen?*

And yet, the image remains useful because of the light it shines upon the significance, the worth, the value of each life. Physicists and mathematicians expanded this principle with the notion of the butterfly effect. Edward Lorenz suggested the likelihood or possibility that the formation and path of a tornado may well be influenced by minor

disturbances such as a distant butterfly flapping its wings several weeks earlier.

Every day and with every encounter, your life makes an impact … sometimes for ill (that's another sermon), but often times for good. You may not sense it, you may forget what you said or what you spontaneously did, but someone was encouraged, assisted, chastened, redirected, illumined, or awakened. You were the bright spot on someone's darkest of days. You helped someone laugh, providing a needed respite from grief. You called that long ago friend not knowing she was adrift in loneliness, your voice bringing her back from the edge. You were sitting across from someone at a kitchen table, feeling totally inadequate before the weight of their burden, having no clue as to what you could say, but you were there, and just being there was exactly what was needed in the moment. You smiled, breaking the spell of someone's cruel world. Your life matters. You make a difference.

This week I read an article about a man you have never heard of, but whose simple presence has made a lasting impact in the lives of a whole community of folks whose names shine on marquees. The son of an immigrant owner of a small music shop in L.A., Fred Walecki grew up in his

father's store, where aficionados of classical music came into purchase an instrument or perhaps have their cellos and violas repaired.

When Fred was coming of age two things happened that would reshape the store, and equip the pioneers reshaping the world of music — His father's death, leaving Fred to run the business at the age of 20; and the coincidental opening of a folk music club next door.

This was the late sixties, and adapting to changes in the music industry, the young Walecki thought it would be a good idea to begin stocking guitars and other instruments for the young, struggling musicians wandering in from the folk club next door. When a young guy in jeans and a suit coat came in one day, he walked over to the wall where the recorders were displayed. Curiously, he would pick up a recorder, put it in his coat pocket, and then place it back on the display. After repeating this move a few times, the ever-gregarious Fred walked up to him inquiring, *"What are you doing?"*

The young guy says, *"I wanted to see how comfortable it is, because I want to use it as a little traveling instrument,"* The guy's name was Jackson Browne, who was not yet *Running on Empty*. Thus, began a decades long

friendship that mirrored a whole host of friendships that began with folks looking for instruments and equipment and discovering a source of conversation, pep talks, counseling, support, wisdom, stories, and always, laughter.

The world did not know Fred, but the musicians did. Over the years, those friendships, stories, and connections would blossom like crepe myrtle in the summer — Bob Dylan, James Taylor, Waylon Jennings, John Entwistle, Jeff Beck, The Eagles, Bonnie Raitt, The Byrds, Emmylou Harris, and the list goes on. The instruments may have been the introduction but the encouragement, support, and hospitality made more of a lasting impact.

When Linda Ronstadt's home was damaged by a storm, Fred showed up with sand bags, quick-dry cement, and a big bag of her favorite Mexican food, and when she separated from George Lucas, Fred drove her home to L.A.. Ronstadt said, *"[Fred] always showed up when he was needed. And he was always needed."* That seemed to be the sentiment of artists ranging from "the Dude" himself, Jeff Daniels, to Christopher Guest, yes, of Spinal Tap, to the Rolling Stones and Joni Mitchell. Walecki didn't approach these headliners as heroes, they were just people, and Fred loves people. A person

of faith, he is guided by the command to love his neighbor, regularly refers to 1 Corinthians 13, and lives in reflection of his father's favorite quote from the profound mind of German writer Johann Goethe, *"A man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul."* (Nancy Walecki, *The Atlantic*)

Think about it, Fred Walecki has not only sought to live by that, but in voice and action has implanted that notion in the lives of many, whose own voices in turn have probably held meaning for your life — "*We'll fill in the missing colors in each other's paint by number dreams"* — Jackson Browne. *"I am not some stone commission, like a statue in the park. I am flesh and blood and vision, I am howling in the dark"* — Joni Mitchell.

A single stone is dropped in the water, and the ripples radiate to the shore.

Even when besieged with despair, demons, and darkness, there are voices and faces present in your life to remind you that your life, as our confessions state, *"is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage."* The cynic may claim this is not true for them, to

which I would say, look up! Look around you, they are here. They are not perfect. They have flaws. They don't always hit the mark, but they trust that God's love is indeed steadfast; they have weathered many storms; and one step at a time they keep walking toward God's kingdom. They have known discouragement and defeat, but they have also experienced a grace that pulls them forward to the possible.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,

As I shared last week, the book of Hebrews took the form of a sermon written to a people, wearied by life, discouraged by the challenges and prospects of being a church. And what happens when discouragement gets a foothold in the real estate of your head and heart? You start to imagine that you are the first to experience this burden, this setback, this wound. No one understands and no one has ever endured this pain before. And so the author offers forth a roll call refuting your myopic and self-involved gloom.

"By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy." You can almost see the preacher or liturgist reading this epistle stopping here, hands on hips, looking out at the congregation, and asking, *So, remind me again what you were complaining about?*

Well! … the reader, the listener, the congregant huffs, *You can't compare me to them. They are all Bible heroes* … No. No they are not …

Some of them participated in some extraordinary events and may have possessed some unique talent, but every one of them was flawed, finite, and occasionally, grievously misbehaved. In fact, when you start digging a bit deeper into their stories, you are bound to start asking — *Why was he included in the list?*

Samson? Probably better suited for the cast of *Love Island* or *The Jersey Shore*. He was a bit of a philanderer. … David? There is a lot about David that we don't mention in Vacation Bible School — Conspiracy to murder an innocent Uriah? Sexual assault? Adultery? … Jephthah? Not sure about that one. Sure, a great warrior defending the Israelites, but in the Bible's description of Jephthah, it says, *"Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him."* And then there was the distasteful incident where he foolishly gambled his only child's life away with an impulsive and horrendous guarantee.

These were not heroes. They were deeply flawed, Yet, through them and through the faith God infused in them, the Spirit accomplished some amazing things, carrying forth God's promises to future generations. And so they join the roll call of those whose faith sustained them, despite their

weaknesses, through trials and travails, torments and tribulations. They stand there alongside the far greater number of those unnamed saints, who bore the promises of God with quiet compassion, humble service, loving care, encouraging presence, risk-taking mercy, and unfailing goodness.

From them, through them, and with them, we can see the faithfulness of God, the steadfast love that will not let us go, so that we will not let love go. Look around you, there are no heroes; there are people, humans, flawed and forgiven, guilty of sin but capable of great life-sustaining love. They are you and you are them and we are God's. And for some mysterious reason, God entrusted us, along with the saints and sinners that populate your own stories, to be the primary vessels through which God's love is known. You have saints in your own lives, and you are saints in the lives of others.

Across the country in college, Fred Walecki's daughter suffered a significant concussion, having to drop the semester. It was an injury such that she was not able to fly home to recover. Nancy Walecki writes — *"I called Dad one night from the other side of the country, panicked that my brain would never return to normal. 'What are you looking at right now?' he asked. Pine trees, I said. Some shrubs. I'm sitting on a bench outside. 'What's the*

temperature like where you are?' It's nice. Cool but not cold. It was early fall in the Northeast, a new sensation for a Californian. 'What does the air smell like? Wood chips. "I know it's hard, but your only job right now is to stay in this moment and not future-trip. In this moment right now, the one God is giving you, the air smells nice, the temperature is good, you're somewhere beautiful." We kept talking and he slowly untangled problems that, before I called, had felt insurmountable. He signed off that night, as he usually does, by saying not I love you, but I'm loving you—love, active. (Nancy Walecki, *The Atlantic*)

Most saints, the dead and the living ones, don't get print coverage in the Bible, but they make a transformational and lasting impact on our lives, offering us the call to be that same kind of presence for others. So, give thanks for the common, ordinary, yet extraordinary saints in our lives … and then, go be one. Amen.