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First Christian Church
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Of Sherpas and Saints

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12a Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one.

Matthew 10:39-42 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.

Romans 14:7-8 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

At the beginning of the summer of 1953, sixty years ago, the eyes of the world were on Mt. Everest. Beginning in 1922, there had been several expeditions attempted to reach the summit of the mountain. It is hard to overstate just how dangerous and life-threatening the attempts to climb Everest were and continue to be. In fact, despite there now being a whole tourist industry where you can be taken to the summit for the mere sum of \$65,000, it is still not for the faint of heart or easily frightened. Even now, folks perish regularly on their attempts to climb the world's highest mountain, and by some reckonings, the job of those who help guide Westerners to its summit is arguably the most dangerous job in the world where the mortality rate approaches five percent! It's a long way up there – when you leave worship today, look to your west at the top of Pikes Peak and then imagine that there was another Pikes Peak on top of it. That's

way up there. The air pressure at 29,000 feet is about 1/3 that of sea level and medical researchers have documented that those who do reach the summit will invariably have dangerously, sometimes fatally, low blood oxygen levels. It is an awesome, brutal, harsh, stunning place where almost 300 people have died trying to reach its summit in the 90 years since such expeditions began.

In the early summer of 1953, another assault upon the mountain began. The press were in attendance. And in those pre-internet days, the only communication was via telegram - and the newspaper reporters sent their telegrams in code so as to not get scooped by their competitors. In fact the first news of the successful summiting of Mt. Everest was sent by a reporter who telegraphed exactly the opposite – “attempt failed,” because he knew that his words were being read and he and his editor had worked out the code that if he sent word of a failure that meant success! But what we mostly don’t remember as we look back on that event is the enormous number of people that it took for two men to finally stand on Everest’s top; there were just under 400 guides, and porters, and climbers and servants. In fact, these days, we mostly don’t even remember that it was **two** men who were the first people to stand on the top of that bleak and beautiful mountain. But there were. We may readily recall the name of Sir Edmund Hillary. But there was a second man with him, one who helped him climb, who shared his warmth – as our scripture from Ecclesiastes reminds us – in flimsy tent in the howling winds and the sub-zero cold. Do you recall his name? Most folks don’t. His name was Tenzing Norgay, a guide from the local area, a “Sherpa,” one – like hundreds of his fellow sherpa people in the eastern mountains of Nepal in this most dangerous occupation in the world – made and continue to make it possible for Westerners to

even attempt that climb, much less succeed. It was Tenzing Norgay who stood with Hillary on top of that mountain, who took the photographs that amazed the world, and who buried on that summit a packages of cookies and candy, a mark of both his Buddhist devotions and as a gift to the mountain and a symbolic gift of sustenance to those who would follow.¹

On this All Saints Sunday, I am reminded that every single one of us has had many “sherpas” in our lives, haven’t we? Every single one of us has had folks who placed gifts in our paths that helped us along the way. Every single congregation, including this one, has had its share of sherpas who were guides in their living, their giving, and even in their dying. Some of those names are now lost to memory, aren’t they, and yet what we celebrate today is that not a one of them is **ever** lost to God’s perfect and eternal life. Some of those guides, those saints, those sherpas, are the names on the page in front of us and on your lips amidst your tears, and some are in deeper places of your hearts - friends, colleagues, co-workers who were your sherpas when you needed encouragement, who carried you when your legs were wobbly and strength had fled, who were guides along the way when you couldn’t see where you were supposed to go, who modeled for you what it was to give and guide and grace. Are you naming those names now? I am. There are so many in what the writer of the Book of Hebrews calls that “great cloud of witnesses.” Let me tell you about a few from First Christian Church who are indeed surely God’s own sherpas and saints:

¹There are literally thousands of articles and books and websites that tell, from a variety of perspectives, the story of Hillary’s and Norgay’s successful climb. A few that I would cite and that I drew from in this sermon include <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/ff681536-add3-11e2-82b8-00144feabdc0.html#slide0> and <http://www.naturapop.com/home/they-opened-the-route-to-mount-everest> and <http://trekkingnepalhimalaya.wordpress.com/tag/tenzing-norgay-sherpa/>

One of the names on the page in front of us, that we lifted to God this morning, is Olga Hock. Many of you remember Olga – her irascible smile, her love of a good joke, her fierce commitment to those who were treated unfairly, and the way she instilled in her children and grandchildren that because one has been blessed, you have a joyful duty to bless others in return. Olga did that in her life, as so many in this room can attest. But this morning I want to tell you that she also did so in her death. Earlier this week her son, Greg Hock, brought me a \$20,000 check for the church from a bequest that Olga had made in her will. And Olga made an identical bequest to the Tennyson Center for Children, so that some those whom Jesus called “the least of these,” those who have been hurt and abused by life - and even by those whom they should have been able to trust the most, might continue to know a safe and healing place.

As we do with all such un-designated gifts, this beautiful bequest will go into First Christian’s Endowment Fund. Now, if you read my newsletter article last week, you know that while that may sound dry as dry can be, such a fund is actually first and foremost a profound faith statement, a theological claim that says this church yet has a mission from God and that God is far, far from done with us yet. And that Fund, and gifts to it, are ways that those who loved the ministries of this church in their lives will also be able to love and support those ministries at their deaths, each and every year, as the earnings from their gifts are combined with those of so many other saints and shepas of the past to make possible ministry that otherwise could not have been done. To make this concrete, the earnings that the Trustees take each year off of the Endowment Fund mean that Olga’s bequest of \$20,000 will make possible, for example, four of our children and youth to have half-scholarships to church camp where

they can encounter in profound ways the love of God. That will happen this year and every year because of Olga's generosity, because of her desire to be a sherpa, a guide, to those whom she will never know but who will be graced by her generosity and her trust in God.

But Olga, and the saints on the page in front of us and the saints whom you are claiming today in the depths of your hearts, also knew that their living, their guiding, their giving had in turn been made possible by the ones who came before them, and whose names they may not have known, but who also intended to bless a future that they would not see. And so Olga was who she was, and you and I are who we are, because of those who guided us.

- *We may not now recall* the name of Mrs. J.E. Wiley, who turned the first shovel of dirt for the construction of this building in 1935 and who had been a part of First Christian since 1881 or the names of the countless folks who during the Depression raised thousands of dollars to build this beautiful building but they were indeed the sherpas and guides of the past who made it possible for us to be in ministry in and from this building today.
- *We may not now recall* the names of those who founded the Fidelis Sunday School Class in 1926 but they were the sherpas and guides of the past who helped model to us even down to this day a commitment to the importance of thinking well about our faith.
- *We may not now recall* the names of those who on the very evening of Pearl Harbor Sunday, December 7, 1941, were courageously invited by the church's leadership to discuss why they were going to be conscientious

objectors to the war; and those leaders thereby proved to be sherpas and guides for how this congregation has always been fiercely committed to defending and celebrating the right of individual conscience no matter how unpopular.

-- *We may not now recall* the names of those members of the youth group who in 1945 went without their war-imposed sugar rations so that they could be collected and made into candy to send as Christmas presents to servicemen and -women in Europe and the South Pacific,² but they too were our sherpas and our guides for this congregation's continuing deep and passionate commitment to hands-on mission in all kinds of ways.

Those are just a few of the many, many saints, the many, many sherpas who have guided and gifted and graced this congregation.

And while she uses a very different image to talk about such guides and sherpas, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell reminds us in a compelling and eloquent way of the truth that we celebrate on this All Saints Sunday, the truth that Olga Hock knew, the truth that those countless ones in the life of this church and in your life and mine knew and know even now. Listen to Barbara's words: A large part of the credit for our being able to do good

...must go to a complex web of the people who helped to form us.... If we forget the debt of gratitude we owe for the very chance we have had to know how to be a good person, we are like a baseball player who got on first base because we

²All of these examples are from the booklet Highlights in the Life of First Christian Church 1878-2003 compiled by the First Christian Church Historians' Committee.

stood there while [the pitcher pitched four balls]. And then our team-mates came along behind and sent us to second, third and across home plate to score but we took credit as if we'd hit a home run!³

But it's not to our credit, is it? And when we forget that we stand, as the cliché goes, on the shoulders of giants, when we forget that it was the sherpas and guides of the past who pointed the way for us to go and helped us become who we are, then our lives are so much punier than they could have been and we will miss the opportunities that we could have had.

For you see, that it is finally the last moment on this All Saints Sunday: **our opportunities**. For while most of the world too-quickly forgot that without sherpa Tenzing Norgay to guide Edmund Hillary to the top of Everest it likely would not have been possible, Hillary himself never forgot and never pretended the credit was his alone and he always looked for opportunities to give back, to become a good guide himself for those who followed him, for those who now looked to him as mentor and model – because he knew what a gift Norgay and those others had been. And that's our call this morning, too; that's our question: Who will YOU be a sherpa for and how?

Because make no mistake: the future WILL look to you for guidance. The question before each one of us, then, is how will we best be and become those guides, how we will best be and become those sherpas for the ones who will follow us? How we will bless a future that we may or may not get to see ourselves but which we can

³Rev. Barbara Shires Blaisdell, "Jonah: Down into the Depths with God. VII. The Injustice of Grace," a sermon preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington, October 27, 2013.

celebrate because folks will come to know more about God through who we are and who we will have been? There are dozens of ways that you might do these things. For example, whether you are young or not-quite-so-young, I hope you have considered making a bequest in your will to First Christian Church that you, like Olga, can love at your death the mission that you supported in your life? Or maybe you can resolve from this point forward that when you encounter someone who is lost, whom life has abraded, who is skeptical of “church” because, sadly, it has been religion that has judged them and hurt them before, you will literally or metaphorically take them by the hand and say *“I know a different sort of place, I know a different sort of God – come, let me show you.”* Or maybe you can resolve from this day forward to be a sherpa, a guide, for those who follow you by cultivating ever-more the spiritual discipline of “paying attention” that you will not miss the amazing things that God is seeking to do in your life, that you might thereby become a person of more gratitude, becoming more the sort of person that preacher Gardner Taylor spoke of when he said *“I have never known anyone who was truly grateful who was at the same time small or petty or bitter or mean or greedy or selfish or who could take any pleasure in anyone else's pain.”*

The 17th century writer and preacher and author of Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan, once said *“You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.”*⁴ Tenzing Norgay left at the top of Everest that gift of sustenance and nourishment and hope for those who would follow him. What gift has God given you that you can use to be a sherpa to others?

⁴<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/41980-you-have-not-lived-today-until-you-have-done-something>