

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Founders' Day

7 May 2006

Hebrews 11:4-12, 29-12:2

The 11th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews is one of my favorites because of the way it defines faith – and the roll call of examples it offers. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." And then the author launches into an incredible recitation of who did what, went where, faced what challenges, obeyed what call – and all of it by faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the people who crossed the Red Sea, the people who brought down the walls of Jericho, Rahab. After spending gobs of words summarizing all of them, the author finally admits that there isn't enough time to tell of all the rest, and does a quick reference to others he'd really like to say more about.

Today is Founders' Day, and in addition to all of those both described and pointed toward in Hebrews 11, we have our own favorite names to add, lift up and learn from. Rev MacGregor, Rev. Parker, Bart Shepard, Helen Noyes, Al and Sue Currier, Bob Cook, and a whole host of others. An incredible legacy of faith – presented to us in the pages of the Bible, in the pages of the history of First Parish Church, and in the faith and legacy of people who have gone before us.

Today we want to do something we don't often do, and that is take a moment to not only celebrate those who have gone before us, but also a few of those who walk now beside us. We want to reflect on the faith and service their lives represent, and give thanks both to them and to God for who they have been and continue to be in our midst. We were struck recently when looking at membership figures, to realize that we have three living members who joined this church in the 40's. We also are fortunate enough to have three living members who are 90 or older. This seems like a very important day to recognize, celebrate and thank them for the model of faith they are for each of us.

Janice Dearth is the youngster in the group – she won't be 90 until October; and she joined First Parish on March 28, 1948. For years she has been a quiet, smiling, caring, dedicated worker. She was President of Se-Lo-Ki (a very active Women's Church Service Group, begun during WWII; Se= Service Lo=Love Ki=Kindness) and worked in this group for many years. When it came time for Church Fairs, she always made 20 – 30 loaves of homemade bread, using a special beater made up with one of her husband Howard's electric drills. She also made home baked beans in her huge bean cooker, and sold them by the pint. Janice was called the Basket Lady: she went to an auction and came home with 40 baskets, and after that she gave baskets of bread, baskets of beans, baskets of cookies. Needlework was another specialty in addition to the baking.

Janice always helped to decorate the church during the holidays. You may have seen her delivering beautiful altar flowers to the church, from her daughter Lin's Florist Shop. At the holidays, she went into the woods, collected partridge berry boughs, and made Berry Bowls for sale at the Fairs. At Christmas she always made gift boxes for the Sunday School Children which included a candy and an orange, which was very generous and considered a very special gift. And most recently, many of us will remember Christmas Carolling at her house last because she was always ready to welcome us in around the table where we received cider and doughnuts and warm appreciation for our visits.

Velma Allen joined the church on April 2, 1944, and will turn 102 this coming November 11th. Her daughter Elaine Allen Roderick is here in her honor this morning. A very caring, generous, giving woman, she also was a very active member of Se-Lo-Ki. She baked for suppers and bake sales; the word I hear is she was most known for her homemade doughnuts and fudge. She played the organ, as well as the cello. I remember being impressed by the warm welcome I received for so long at Birchwood Nursing Home, now Haven Health; she couldn't hear me well enough for us to carry on much of a 2-way conversation, but she always greeted me warmly, had read the newsletter carefully and commented on things we were doing there, and enjoyed spending time together visiting the best we were able.

Altadena Spofford, who most of us know as Dena, is the new arrival in the group, having joined the church as recently as April 15, 1965; we're celebrating her today because she's part of the over 90 crowd. She was another active member of Se-Lo-Ki. She was the church's Assistant Treasurer for 21 years, as well as Treasurer for 3 years! She taught Sunday School and served on the Christian Education Committee, was a Deaconess, chair of the Church Community Action Committee, worked on luncheons, receptions, special events, funerals and celebrations. She was chair of Church Apple Pie Festivals for years, a member of the 3M Group (a church social group), worked on Sugar Plum Fairs, both by baking for the church food table and making quilts. She was an instrumental part of the Quilters of FPC, a group that met in her home for many years, and made beautiful handmade quilts – and I'm proud to say that Ben and I were fortunate enough to have the group make a quilt for us, as well as finish one started by my grandmother and mother. She's made countless Christmas & Thanksgiving Baskets for others. She worked long and hard gilding the church tower clock and Weathervane for 275th Anniversary, and when the celebration arrived, Dena donned a costume and rode in a horse drawn carriage for the event. She's worked for years on Best Breakfast, and comes once a month to help collate the Newsletter each month. And in addition to all her church duties is still an active volunteer at Parkland Hospital.

Donald Houston turned 90 this past December, and this year celebrates 60 years as a member of First Parish, having joined on April 21, 1946. Don is a committed, caring, gentleman, who always smiles, and gives great hugs. He participated in a Couples Group with his wife Marion, served as Church Moderator for over 25 years, was Superintendent of the Church School for 7 years, participated in Board of Ministries and Search Committees, was on the Board of Deacons, Parliamentarian at Annual Meetings, Auditor of Books, . Don chaired Harvest Supper for over 25 years, compiled and printed a booklet on FPC's stained glass windows, and joined others in costume for the church's 275th Anniversary Celebration. For years, he provided the church with arrangements of altar flowers from his own garden. He continues to help collate monthly

Newsletter. And in addition to all of that, Don has an incredible knowledge of the church's history, both able to answer questions about what happened when, and eager to offer tidbits of perspective on when traditions started and who was a part of what.

I started all of this by pointing toward the role call of the faithful that we find in Hebrews 11, and it seems essential to me to end it by pointing us toward the opening words of Hebrews 12: "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..." We've lifted up this foursome today because we want to honor them and say thank you while they are still here to hear us. But I think we've also lifted them up because of the examples they present of people who have given generously of themselves for the sake of Christ's church. People who know what it means to serve and give, to lead and work alongside, to sacrifice and celebrate, to give of who they are and what they have in order that others' lives might be blessed, the church might be strengthened, and God might be both served and praised. Theirs is part of the witness that surrounds us and sends us forward, into our annual meeting, into the coming year, into the next chapter of the next 287 years of the faith and ministry that is First Parish Congregational United Church of Christ. Surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses and many, many others, lets us press forward and take our place alongside them, that together we might serve and give, lead and work alongside, sacrifice and celebrate, give of who we are and what we have in order that others' lives might be blessed, the church might be strengthened and God might be both served and praised.

Amen.