

When I consider the great cloud of witnesses - those saints who have gone before us - I think of Colonel Ashbrook. He was a large man with a round face and red hair. I remember Colonel Ashbrook because he told the stories of Jesus in such a lively way that it made me want to know more and more. He had flannel boards common in that day, but it was mostly his presence, his big voice and his enthusiasm. My dad would take me to Sunday School on most Sunday mornings in those days. That was many years ago, but Colonel - I don't know any other name for him - belongs in that great company of the saints who kept the faith and passed it on to others. I doubt he thought one of his Sunday School kids - who didn't listen all that well - would one day be a pastor. But he told the stories of Jesus and here I am giving thanks for his witness.

I left the church for a long time and wandered into some very dark places. When I returned it was an Episcopal priest named Jim Hardison who helped me understand why I wanted to follow Jesus. Claudia and I were youth advisors for his daughter. Jim lived the Beatitudes and inspired me to do the same. We would go before sunrise to look for birds. With him I saw my first vermilion flycatcher in all its radiant beauty. Jim would ride around with a canoe always on top of his old station wagon. When I asked why, he said you never know when you might come to a river. When he wasn't bird watching or canoeing or parenting, he was visiting prisoners on death row, offering them holy communion and the mercy of Christ. He was fierce in advocating for their dignity as children of God. We knelt together praying in the capital rotunda for justice and mercy to flow from halls of power. Not only did death row prisoners find a friend in Jim, they found a friend in Jesus through him. And when Jim was not serving the sacrament and preaching the gospel, he founded with his wife a chapter of Bread for the World and a food distribution center at his parish. When I took the step from Social Work to Seminary, Jim gave me this cross as a gift. On the back it reads from Amos: let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an every flowing stream. At age 52, while I was in seminary preparing to be a pastor, Jim died of a brain tumor. His family gathered around him singing psalms as he requested. And at his funeral, the poor along with the powerful filled the sanctuary to hear Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.

I went on from there to serve a church in Kentucky where I was blessed to visit with Lois Trimble nearly once a week. The beatitudes of Jesus were never far from our conversations. She once told me not to expect her in worship on Christmas or Easter because "I don't want people to think I only come on those days.." When Lois was younger, she would ride by horseback deep into the hollers of Eastern Kentucky to bring food and other supplies to the poorest of the poor. While she was there she would teach people to read by reading to them the classics and the Bible. She was fluent in multiple languages. Her late husband was President of Berea College. When I came to know Lois she was going blind from macular degeneration, which is why she memorized great chunks of poetry, scripture, Shakespeare and other classics. When we visited she would recite to me and encourage me to do the same. Because, as she put it, "you never know when you'll go blind." In her last years, she gave her entire estate - which was considerable - to the YWCA in exchange for living out her life there in a modest way of life. Very few honors are greater than being

asked to preside at her funeral. We recited "Blessed we the poor in Spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of God."

These are some of the people in that great cloud of witnesses who have inspired me to run the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Who has inspired you? For whom will you give thanks today?