

**In Remembrance of Margaret Johnson
Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Saturday, 6 April 2018**

**Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
“Difficult and Wonderful to Remember”**

Not many, and perhaps none of us, can remember being with Margaret for all ninety-one years of her life. If we could remember her from the day of her birth in September 1927 all the way until her death just over a week ago, we would recollect many things difficult and many things wonderful. I enjoyed only two or three visits with Margaret, yet even those visits are difficult and wonderful for me to remember. It is difficult and wonderful to reflect on others' lives, just as it is difficult and wonderful to remember our own lives, though thus far only partially lived. I lifted for the title of my homily this morning from our own dear and beloved Jack Bixby, my mentor and friend. He used the the phrase in a telephone call to the Johnson family early this week. Jack could not be here today. Yet I image that with this phrase Jack intended to convey to us two realities simultaneously - that our lives are a curious mix of angst and bliss. I experienced both of these sentiments when visiting Margaret: angst over her confusion and inability to swallow and bliss as she expressed a peace, assurance and

affirmation of me, though I had hardly deserved it. How much more the difficulty and joy of remembering Margaret must be for all of you who knew her more than I!

Our scripture reading this morning conveys the difficulty and beauty in remembering. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...” Yes, the key phrase there is “a great cloud of witnesses” that Margaret has now joined. We are surrounded by her, and her dear husband, Carl, also a faithful servant of this church. But the key word in this verse is the first word ‘Therefore’. You see, before the word ‘therefore’ in “*Therefore*, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses”, Paul recounted in the chapter immediately preceding the entirety of his people’s history! And this history contains as much discomfort as it does comfort and Paul wallowed in it finally concluding “*Therefore*, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...”. This word ‘therefore’ and the image of ‘a great cloud of witnesses’ cannot be read without knowing through chapter eleven the full scope of biblical narrative as it recounts difficult and beautiful stories.

The apostle Paul in an epic summary, waxed eloquently upon the subject of faith, which can simply be described as an intimate and

trusting relationship with God, the Creator of our lives. Paul recounted the faith of the ancients beginning with Abel, and that brought-up the pain of Cain. Paul remembered Enoch's life and death. Paul moved on to Noah, reminiscing on his faith. But, that also brings up some dysfunctional times. Paul remembered the beauty of God's promise to Abraham, the father of many nations. But, therein too Abraham's sojourn from Ur to Canaan was not without its angst. After dwelling on Abraham, Paul recounts the stories of Isaac, Jacob, Esau and Joseph who all experienced betrayal and tender love during the course of their conflicted relationships with one another. Paul remembered Moses. Moses had great faith and some doubt, with success and a few setbacks. Paul, dictating, eyes closed, rejoiced at the edge of the Red Sea and outside the walls of Jericho. Then almost in a panic Paul remembered like a Gatling Gun needing to be cooled, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, and all the prophets who during their lives, because of their faith, had many memories difficult and beautiful to remember.

So, where does that leave us, this morning? Where does that leave us who are surrounded by such 'a great cloud of witnesses' that has now welcomed our mother Margaret? Well, if we wish to honor and pay respectful homage to Margaret in this 'great cloud of witnesses', we ought to, first and foremost, to continue her legacy of faith.

Margaret's faith in God manifested itself in service to her family, to her community and to her church. Therefore, each and every one of us, if we are not here simply out of pious obligation, but rather loving adoration for Margaret, should also in our lives be servants of our families, our communities and our places of worship. The best, and I would argue the only, way to honor Margaret is to support a faith community, ours, if you so inclined, or another if you live far away or belong to another faith tradition. For in supporting Centre Congregational Church or another house of worship, you are supporting all that which Margaret did: family, community and church.

Paul encourages us to run with perseverance the race marked out for us. For Margaret that race included family, community and church. Margaret ran this race for ninety-one years. To remember all those years is both difficult and beautiful. Yet, the Apostle Paul reminds us that in faith, there can be much beauty in the difficulty of remembering. In Jesus' name, and in Margaret's name, I encourage each of you to, in faith, invest in your family, your community and in your house of worship so that you too may one day join that 'great cloud of witnesses'.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded. "Amen".