

Life In the Cloud

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If you've looked at the title of this morning's sermon, and are hoping for a sermon on the joys of data storage, I'm about to disappoint you.

Or if you're hoping for a salacious tell-all about my time in those lazy, hazy, crazy days of the drug-drenched 1960s, when many of us were wreathed in clouds of various smoked substances, that, too, is not on this morning's agenda – at least not on mine.

No, the cloud I want to speak about this morning is that great cloud of witnesses identified so famously by the anonymous author of the book of Hebrews: "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 are not in this alone. That's the message of this passage of the book of Hebrews, it's the message of the entire Bible, and it's the message of the gospel. We do not run this race alone and, as the choir has sung in the past, we do not run this race in vain.

We are Christians, members of the church, the body of Christ on earth, and as such, it is our great privilege and delight to be part of a universal and historic company of believers who have witnessed to God's love, shown to us in Jesus Christ. They witnessed to that love in their age and in their place and in their way, just as we do in our age and in our place and in our way. Together, we make up a great cloud – a vast congregation, a mighty host – who refuse to give up and who refuse to give in. We are the church, visible and invisible.

Now notice, right away, who makes up this visible and invisible church. It's not just the people we call Christians, at least not according to the author of Hebrews. The first example in that long list, which we'll be reading more about in coming weeks, is Abel, Adam and Eve's second boy, killed by his brother Cain. Abel was hardly a Christian, and though he was killed, Hebrews says, he still speaks. He was slain by his brother in a fit of jealous rage because God accepted Abel's offering and did not accept Cain's. We don't know why, no one does, and, in the long run, it doesn't matter, because the story of Cain and Abel is not about why God seems to favor some and not favor others, but rather it's a story about human nature and human violence.

Cain became angry at God and vented that anger against his innocent brother. Abel had done nothing wrong; he had done what he was supposed to do. Presumably Cain had done what he was supposed to do, too, but for reasons unmentioned, his life was not met with divine favor; and instead of taking his hurt and disappointment out on the one whose favor he sought, he took it out instead on the one at hand. Human nature – jealous, hurt, angry, and disappointed – working itself out in human violence. One of our oldest and saddest stories, and the Bible is truthful enough to remind us of it in its opening pages.

Abel, according to Genesis and Hebrews, is a witness to his brother's volatile nature and violent actions. Abel is the world's first victim of homicidal rage. Abel becomes part of that cloud that tell us something about God and God's dealings with us and our dealings with God and God's world. Abel had done nothing to deserve the death

he was dealt at his brother's hand, and he stands at the head of a long line of victims similarly treated.

What did Jesus do to wind up crucified? He went about healing people and feeding people and urging people to chart a new path for their lives – a path based on non-violence, compassion, and justice. Did the crowds who flocked to his sermons and miracles provoke the jealousy of the guardians of their religious tradition? Is that what brought Jesus into their cross-hairs? Or was it their insecurity in the face of Jesus's challenging their way of being faithful? Readers of the New Testament will continue to ponder these questions for ages to come, but what is clear is that Jesus stands as a witness to human nature and human violence.

And what about the victims of the civil war in El Salvador, where Ron and Mary Ober do their fair-trade mission work? Innocent people – men, women, and children – caught between factions armed in part by us and slaughtered for no other reason than for being in war's path – what of them and their lives and their deaths? Are they meaningless, or do those people speak to us yet as witnesses, like Abel and like Jesus, to human nature and human violence?

The list is long: Native Americans, enslaved Africans, European Jews, Armenians, children at Columbine, Chardon, and Sandy Hook – and so many more. The cloud of witnesses is heavy with the weight of those killed for their land, worked to death, systematically cleansed from the ethnic mix that makes up the human race, or simply because they went to school that morning. All witnesses, like Abel, to our fallen nature and our propensity toward violence.

The cloud of witnesses is glorious, but it is not pretty, and it behooves us who are serious and honest about our Christian faith not to romanticize, sentimentalize, or trivialize that host of witnesses. The Greek word translated witness here is *martyros*, the source of our word martyr, and martyrdom, as we all know, is serious business indeed.

Last Wednesday night, as part of our book group's discussion of Saul Bellow's novel, *Seize the Day*, I mentioned an article by Reinhold Niebuhr from the 1960s in which he lamented not the church's sins or its errors, but rather the church's increasing trivialization of the gospel. In its desire to be relevant, the church had become trivial. It had taken its message of redemption – deliverance from all the forces of sin and death – and broken it into user-friendly bits of self-help and pseudo-therapy. The American church, in Niebuhr's mind, had become the place to come to to feel good, not the place to be confronted with the kind of love that Dorothy Day described as a "harsh and dreadful thing."

Niebuhr, I believe, was right. The cloud of witnesses of which we are a part and which I intend to speak more about in sermons this summer, is not a place where you can drop in on a Sunday morning – assuming you don't have some more pressing obligation. The witnesses to the faith expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ were serious people who took their lives as God's chosen people with utmost seriousness; faith, for them, was neither hobby nor therapy. Faith, for them, to use the phrase of Paul Tillich, was their ultimate concern. Is it yours?

That's what we're about in this place, this church – this Midwestern, suburban outpost of the church universal, visible, and invisible. We are what the poet Philip Larkin called "a serious house on serious earth." We mean business. We mean the business of love, justice, peace, and joy. We mean the business of depth, breadth, and height. We mean the business of widening the scope of our concern to include not just other suburbanites or other Christians or even other people, but all of God's creation. When we say inclusive, we mean it big.

We mean the business of learning about our faith – in the pages of Scripture, in the

teachings of the historic community of faith, and in the inspiration of poets and artists and novelists and essayists. We mean the business of bringing the demands of God's love – and God's love is very demanding – to bear on the brokenness and evil of our time and our place.

We mean all of that and a great deal more in this church, and we are blessed – truly blessed – to be called to such a task.

You and I, dear fellow travelers, are part of something “complete and great” as Willa Cather put it, and that is a cause for joy. The demands are many and the workers are few, but we do not work alone. Whether we are feeding meatloaf to hungry people downtown, showering mothers and babies with the necessities of infancy, or preparing our young people for their adult responsibilities, we work with the Holy Spirit, our comforter and guide.

And we work in that vast company of women and men down through the ages who have claimed for themselves the same high calling from God that makes us followers of Jesus the Christ. The cloud of witnesses is very great and it's ours as the gift of God. It's ours for inspiration, protection, reflection, and correction. It's ours to help us on our way. And for such a gift and for such a giver, let our word be thanks and thanks and ever thanks. Amen.