

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Hebrews 11:29—12:2

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...(Hebrews 12:1-2a)

Last Sunday we heard strong words of encouragement from Jesus — words that span the centuries and reach out to us too:

Fear not, *little* flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.(Luke 12:32, KJV)

I mean to begin this sermon by focusing on that adjective “little.” We are as Jesus says: we are a “little flock.” We are not a massive flock of sheep, let us say, stretching acre upon acre and turning the hillsides white with our wool. No, we are just a little flock. Why, the whole Church on earth is a but a little flock compared to the multitudes of people on our planet. The sum total of all the Christians through the ages is but a small fraction of the humans who have ever lived. And to be a member of this congregation, Immanuel Lutheran Church, is to be a member of a little flock. I hope and pray that we grow larger, for I believe Jesus is here, as he promises, and I would like lots of folks to draw near to him. But even if we grow a great deal, we will still be just a “little flock” compared to the tens of thousands of people in our part of town.

Only the Lord knows the heart, and so only he knows whether the passerby on the sidewalk or the neighbor on the subway is a Christian. But sometimes it looks as if there are not many Christians around and that to be a believer in Jesus is to walk a lonely path.

That is why I am so grateful for this morning's text. It lifts our eyes, broadens our

perspective, and permits us to see things more with heaven's eyes. Why, our text speaks of a “cloud of witnesses.” Imagine being on a mountain top, surrounded by a cloud. Then, there's nothing else to be seen. In every direction there is the cloud. As innumerable as the drops of water are in the cloud, so many are your brothers and sisters in the Communion of Saints. All told, you are part of a considerable blessing in human history and a substantial cause of hope for the future, for you take your place within a majestic cloud of witnesses.

When I read biographies of the saints, when I read their sermons and try to imagine their lives and their times, I am often brought up short, and I am ashamed that I am such an insubstantial Christian compared to many in the past. I have not suffered for my faith as did those mentioned in the Epistle. I am not among those holy ones who...

³⁶...suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment.

³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.(Hebrews 11:36-38)

No, I have not yet suffered for Christ as they did, and perhaps I never will. But isn't it

encouraging that, judging by our text, those holy ones are willing to count us friends? They “surround us.” When sin, death, and the devil glare at us with hatred and terrible fury, saints of old who have been mocked, stoned, sawn in two — they “surround us.” They circle round us, like big brothers and big sisters declaring to our enemies, “To get to him, to get to her, you must go through us and our prayers! And not just us, but also our Saviour Jesus!”

If I were a seminary professor trying to teach the next generation to preach, I think I would especially urge this upon them: that in bearing witness to Christ we stand upon the shoulders of the saints who have gone before us. We should seek to be mindful of our surrounding cloud of witnesses. Let us take thought for the saints of old, including our own loved ones who have passed on to Jesus. Let us be encouraged by their example and seek to take our place with them.

Back when Pastor Patti Welch was a seminary intern here, I shared with her what I try to hold continually in my own heart: that when we walk up these few steps and take our place at the sacred desk, we should remember the saints and he whom they loved, even Jesus Christ. We should consider that we are taking our place in a long chain of preachers stretching back to the apostles. Indeed, we should try to picture the Communion of Saints surrounding us. We should try to imagine St. Paul over in yon pew, St. Peter nearby. Picture Mary, the Mother of our Lord and Mary Magdalene. Think of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Think of St. Chrysostom and St. Augustine. Imagine Martin Luther leaning forward in his pew straining to catch each word. Think of St. Francis and the martyrs. Picture our mothers and father in the Lord, our grandmothers and grandfathers, our pastors from when we were young: And try to live and speak in such a way that the surrounding saints will sigh with contentment and say, “Aye, I hear the old, old story that I myself love to tell and mean to sing through all eternity. They are gathered around the blessed Gospel here. Yes, he speaks of Jesus. She

speaks of our Lord. We recognize this preaching. Why, we preached it ourselves back in our day. We consider it to be the veritable Word of God!”

That is, whenever we witness for Christ, whether we are ordained or lay, we should try to speak and live in such a way that the surrounding cloud of witnesses will not hang their heads in discouragement, but will instead be cheering us onwards.

So, that is my first theme this morning: You and I are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

My second theme is that this is a pragmatic fact. The Apostle does not merely affirm the doctrine of the surrounding saints, but also he puts it to use in urging our sanctification. And so, he speaks of a great “therefore”:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...

Notice that the apostle speaks of the most accessible of athletic skills: running. He is not speaking of fencing or hitting a fastball or sizing up the defense and delivering the football on time, but rather he is speaking of something that Forrest Gump can do and which many of us can do: we can run. Even if we are old, we can hasten onward.

“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” teaches the Apostle. Ponder the saints of old, ponder the great cloud of witnesses who surround us: they ran their race with perseverance. Your mother and father might have been faithful. They might have run their race well. Someone in your life might have run well. Certainly saints of old have run well. Go and do likewise.

And the Apostle brings his exhortation to its pinnacle by speaking of Jesus. For Jesus is the one who the great cloud of witnesses themselves followed:

...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...(Hebrews 12:1-2a)

Did Jesus run with the perseverance the race set before him? You know he did! This morning's Gospel Lesson is frightening, with its theme that, for now, Jesus brings division to earth, even dividing families. But let us not miss the great testimony of our Lord's love which serves as the fundamental theme in the whole passage:

⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!(Luke 12:49)

What constrains him? A "baptism to be baptized with." And what is this baptism? His death on the cross that you and I might have life. This is the race set before him, and this is the race he ran with perseverance, all the way to victory.

Let me close with one of Martin Luther's favorite ideas: that the love of Christ is strong toward each generation, including our own. As Luther reminds us, Jesus did not die just for Peter, James, and John. He did not die simply for his blessed mother, nor just for the other holy women of the Gospel story. He did not die just for St. Francis nor just for John Paul II. He died for them, yes, but also he died for you, for me.

And so we see this strange, almost unbelievable, claim in this morning's Hebrews' reading. It suggests that the great cloud of witnesses, including the saints and heroes of the past, must wait patiently for you and me, because we too are precious to the Lord.

³⁹And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had foreseen something better *for us*, that *apart from us* they should *not* be made perfect.

Late-born though we are, our Maker counts us dear to him too and is unwilling that the early saints should reach perfection before us. It is as if our Heavenly Father requires the older brothers and sisters to be patient and to wait at the supper table till we little ones get there. His love for us late-born saints is equal to his love for the saints of old. They were holy, pious, suffering Christians, and the Triune God loves them very much. And yet he loves you and me just as much. In our own eyes, we might seem lightweight compared to Christians who have preceded us, like the Prodigal Son might have seemed lightweight in his own eyes compared to his older, more righteous brother, yet the true God is one who rushes out even to the younger son and throws his arms around his neck.

In fact, the true God invites you and me to the same "foretaste of the feast to come" that he has offered to the Twelve, to the Apostles, to the Martyrs, and to the Saints through all the ages. Yes, he invites us now to Holy Communion with Jesus Christ, the great Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.