Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/18/2019, the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15C  
Surrounded, for Our Good!

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

My text for this morning's sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, from the beginning of Hebrews Chapter 12. It is a famous passage. It goes this way:

1Therefore, 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, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.  
(Hebrews 12:1-2, RSV)

I think this is a friendly and encouraging passage. In fact, I feel that it is a gift of God to me personally in this strange time when I am victim of a threat. I briefly spoke of this threat in my pastoral notes on the first page of this morning’s worship folder. Let me add a word or two now, to help explain why I am so happy to be surrounded by such good people as you and the great cloud of witnesses. So, as I understand things, they go this way: There is a fellow here in New York City who has a complaint against a Roman Catholic priest in Illinois. A couple weeks ago, this fellow left a voice message with a law firm in Houston, Texas saying that if he did not make progress on his legal case against the Illinois priest, he was going to hurt priests here in New York City. I guess he chose New York City clergy because we are close at hand for him. And the one pastor he actually discussed is… me. I guess he chose my name from the internet. I do not know him, yet he has threatened me. It is all very random, and yet worrisome. We have notified the police, and God bless the police, not only in this matter but in all cases, for they are trying to protect the innocent. So, we have done what we can. What remains for me as a pastor is simply to walk with perseverance the race set before me. I mean to do that. But as I do it, I am awfully grateful to be surrounded by you good people and your prayers, and to be surrounded by the great multitude of witnesses and heroes of faith with Christ. That is our topic for this morning: the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. So, let me return to my sermon.

I believe that the more people we picture in that great crowd the better off we will be. If you were an actor or actress, it is right that you should seek the approval of the audience. But for each of us, including Christian actors and
actresses, the approval we should truly and finally seek is that of the saints and of the Lord they love. The saints and prophets and apostles are near at hand to us, for they are with Jesus, and he has promised to be where two or three are gathered together in his name. That is us. Such we are, gathered in his name, right here and now. Those faithful ones of the past hope we do well. They hope we live lives worthy of the precious name of Jesus. They pray for us, I am quite sure. If mother and father prayed for us during their earthly lives, why should they stop when they are in heaven? So I say, the more people we picture in that great crowd of witnesses around us, the better. The more we enlarge our sense of the divine theater on which we live out our days, the more prepared we shall be to live a holy life following Jesus in these years granted to us.

There are two main parts to this morning’s Bible text: First, there is the beautiful claim that we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” And second, there is the exhortation that we should look to Jesus and “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” Let us enjoy these two themes, beginning with the idea that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

To be surrounded by a great cloud of enemies would be an awful thing. But St. Paul is not talking about enemies but about witnesses. He means people who have faced threats in life, but continued faithful to the Lord. Think of the prophet Elijah, for example. Queen Jezebel hated him and swore to kill him. But Elijah pressed on, always faithful to the Lord. Likewise, think of Daniel in the lion’s den and the three young Israelites in the burning, fiery furnace. These folks all faced intense threats, but pressed on, true to the Lord. The apostle is directing our minds toward all the people through the ages who have endured much for the sake of their love of the Lord. Most of all, he would have us think of Jesus, who endured much for our salvation, and never shied away from his path. St. Paul would have us be encouraged by the lives of the saints and of Jesus above all.

So that word “surrounded” is a friendly word. It does not mean surrounded by enemies, but rather surrounded by people who have been noble, faithful, who love us and hope we do well in the time remaining to us.

I think I have mentioned before that my little sister down on the Eastern shore of Maryland has three sons, each of whom live just a mile or two from the farm where they grew up and where my sister and her husband still live. The three sons are each married and each young couple has five children. Now they seem to be starting round six, for one of the couples is expecting another baby. Pastor Carol has just finished knitting a baby sweater for that baby, as she has done for each of the fifteen before this one. And just a couple days ago, we learned that another of the couples is expecting a baby. Things do not always work out this way, but I am glad to say that each of these grandchildren is growing up surrounded by love—surrounded by lots of brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts and uncles and grandmother and
grandfather who love them. It is a good way to grow up, in my opinion, to be surrounded by people who care deeply for us.

Such we are! In the ordinary measure of things, we might have small families and we might live fairly private and solitary lives. But the apostle would have us lift up our hearts and to know that we are in fact surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who care deeply for us.

Note what our text does not say: It does not say that this great cloud of witnesses is elevated above us, removed from our daily struggles here on earth, safe and sound in glory. No, the apostle says that this great cloud of witnesses “surrounds us.” That seems to be their job for now, to be with us, to be cheering us on, to be praying for us. My mother and father, for example, died long ago. But St. Paul would have me think that they are not all that distant from me even now. And in thinking this, the apostle would have me to be strengthened and encouraged. Same with my dear teacher Robert W. Jenson and my dear pastor from of old, Pastor Raymond Shaheen. It makes things better for me to think of them — to think of them as part of a great crowd of witnesses surrounding me and urging me on toward a holy life.

St. Paul points to quite a group of witnesses. I have mentioned Elijah, Daniel, and the three young Israelites in the burning, fiery furnace. But there are more. They are known as “the heroes of faith.” They also include people like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Gideon. Heroes indeed! To have endured opposition, persecution, loneliness, and the contempt of powerful people... To have weathered the wrath of mighty kings and pharaohs, the claws and teeth of lions, the sparks of flames from the great furnace. These folks all knew something about how hard it can be to be faithful to God. Now they surround us and cheer us on.

My mother and father, for example, died long ago. But St. Paul would have me think that they are not all that distant from me even now. And in thinking this, the apostle would have me to be strengthened and encouraged. Same with my dear teacher Robert W. Jenson and my dear pastor from of old, Pastor Raymond Shaheen. It makes things better for me to think of them — to think of them as part of a great crowd of witnesses surrounding me and urging me on toward a holy life.

By tradition, it is St. Paul who is speaking to us through this letter to the Hebrews. Well, I am glad to think that he too is within that cloud of witnesses surrounding us. He and St. Peter, both of whom died as martyrs for the sake of Jesus Christ. We know from his letters that St. Paul endured many troubles during the course of his ministry—shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, opposition from people he had hoped would be friends. If we have known some troubles in trying to be true to Jesus, it is likely that St. Paul has known similar troubles or even deeper ones, and now he is in that great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and praying for us. Think too of the saints throughout the ages. Think of St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. Chrysostom, Blessed Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, and every other hero of the faith important to you. Think of such people as being close at hand to you, surrounding you, and let yourself be encouraged by their witness and by their love for you.

And there is Someone greater still. In that great crowd of witnesses surrounding us, we should think chiefly of God. It is nice to think of Elijah, St. Paul, and St. Augustine surrounding us and cheering us on. It is even greater
to think of Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, as our daily companion
and friend. But what does Jesus say? Does he not invite us to view God himself
as dwelling with us, close at hand? Remember what Jesus says in the Gospel
of St. John:

        Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and
my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our
home with him.” (John 14:23, RSV)

Again, according to the ordinary measure of things, we might be fairly private
and solitary people. But the truth is greater than that. The truth is that we
have great and important friends very close at hand, including God the Father,
Jesus Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit. We do not fight an entirely lonely
battle. We have the advantage of the host of heaven on our side.

So that is our first theme: we are surrounded by a great multitude of
witnesses—mighty good folks who pray for us and wish us well.

Our second great theme is the apostolic exhortation that we should look to
Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and that we should run with
perseverance the race set before us.

In my parish email last week I spoke of the election of our new national
bishop – Bishop Dan Selbo. I lifted up his great line about love—about our
love for Jesus. It goes this way:

        My hope is that Christ will be seen in us because we have fallen in
love with Him and we have no greater purpose in life than to live for
Him.

St. Paul’s exhortation about looking to Jesus is connected with Bishop Selbo’s
call that it should be seen in us that we love Jesus. For if we love anyone, we
will look to that one. We will keep our eye on that one. We will hope to live a
life pleasing to that one. So it is with our love for Jesus. It both reflects our
love for Jesus and strengthens our love for him for us to keep our eye on him
and to imitate his manner of life. If Jesus was merciful in his earthly ministry,
so should we practice mercy. If Jesus was brave in his earthly ministry, so we
should be brave. If Jesus bore affliction in his earthly ministry—poverty,
opposition, and even the cross—so should we bear with afflictions in life but
never turn away from the ways of Jesus. We should “look to Jesus,” and run
with perseverance the race set before us.

One of my favorite parts of the liturgy is the conclusion of the Eucharistic
Prayer—that moment when we think of the great cloud of witnesses
surrounding us and pray that we will be in unity with them. The prayer goes
this way:
Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all.

It is a prayer that combines the good themes we have been talking about this morning. It enlarges our vision and asks us to think of the great crowd of witnesses surrounding us, “of every time and every place,” and bids us all to point ourselves toward Jesus, until he comes “as victorious Lord of all.”

When that happens, when Jesus comes again as victorious Lord of all, well, then we are meant for some good and eternal times. As St. Paul says:

Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. (1 Corinthians 2:9, KJV)

So, let us be among that great crowd of witnesses. Let us take our place among the multitudes of “them that love him,” — yes, who love Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.