

August 19, 2007
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Cloud of Witnesses

At this time in the summer, I am still enjoying the more relaxed pace

- when school is not in session
- when church committees and many church programs are taking Sabbath time
- when the weather invites us to spend plenty of time outdoors.

Yet, at about this time, I begin to sense that fall is coming and the “race” is about to commence. I can feel both excitement at the new possibilities and resistance to the “rat race” character of much of American life, especially for those of us with children still in school. This race we enter each fall feels like a sprint. The problem is that it keeps going and going, like the Eveready Bunny, whereas the whole point of a sprint is that it stops after a **brief** period of time.

On the other hand, the “race” referred to in the letter to the Hebrews is not a sprint. It’s a marathon. It’s like what John Fischer has been doing this summer in his bike trip across the country. It requires planning, preparation, endurance, sometimes shifting gears, and lots of help from others.

The race the letter to the Hebrews is talking about is the race of life. It is a race that requires pacing and perseverance and other people – a cloud of witnesses.

One “cloud of witnesses” is the people around us today. The people we live with us on a day-to-day basis – family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other people at church. We witness others’ lives and we give witness to others, whether we want to or not. Contrary to the American myth of the lone ranger, we are in this together.

There is another “cloud of witnesses”, which is referred to in letter to the Hebrews. That is those who have gone before, who have faced difficult challenges, but persevered. Each of these people or group of people is introduced by the phrase “by faith.” In our Western Protestant tradition we are tempted to equate faith with intellectual assent to theological statements. So we might think that “by faith” meant that these people were able to recite, and agree with, the Heidelberg Catechism, for example. Yet, the writer of the Hebrews does not tell us any theological propositions to which the cloud of witnesses gave assent. Instead we hear about the ways these people responded in action “by faith.”

Those being addressed in this letter had formerly been subject to persecution, imprisonment, and loss of property as a result of their faith. The writer is exhorting them to not lose heart – to recognize that they not only have each other – but they also have a cloud of witnesses of those who have gone

before, who faced difficult challenges, but by faith persevered.

Today, we are not (although others in the world are) experiencing persecution, imprisonment, and loss of property for our faith. In fact, for some of us the challenge is to not be so caught up in the “rat race” of life. So shall we spend our days focusing on serious spiritual matters? On the one hand, the obvious answer is yes. But, on the other hand, the way we go about that can be counterintuitive. In the “cloud of witnesses” there are many great spiritual teachers who have pointed out that often growth in faith comes not from focusing the mind more stringently on serious spiritual matters, but by having the mind focus on the more ordinary, even the mundane. It is counterintuitive, but true.

One experience I had with this was six years ago when our daughter, Karin, and I spent a week at Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian Retreat Center in Northern New Mexico. It’s like camp for the whole family. One of the things I love about going there is the reduction in background noise. No TV, no radio, no stereo, no telephone. However, there were plenty of screen doors. Remember screen doors at camp in the summer? Each of the rooms in the building we stay in opened onto an exterior hallway, and each room had a screen door. Early in the morning and in the evening when everyone was stirring or returning there was a virtual percussive chorus of whacking doors.

At the beginning of the week these noises registered as a minor annoyance. However, during the week, I became more conscious of this persistent noise when I came across a story about an

encounter between Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Thomas Merton, who is in that cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us, was a Trappist monk. He has had a profound influence on the practice of and reflection on spiritual matters in Western culture. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, who is in that cloud of witnesses still with us, has had a profound influence in sharing the practice of and reflection on spiritual matters from an Eastern perspective with those of us who live in Western culture. It is a particularly crucial dialogue when you realize that in many ways Jesus was from an Eastern culture and lived with those sensibilities. If we are to keep our eyes and hearts looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we would be wise to seek understanding of the world in which he lived.

In the 1960’s, when (Thomas) Merton, (a Trappist monk), was in his fifties, he started on a new path of spiritual seeking. He looked to the religious traditions of the East, and they changed how he practiced his Christianity. At this time of discovery in Merton’s life he met a young Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh, who was traveling in the U.S. speaking out on the injustices and horror taking place in his homeland of Vietnam. Here were two monks of different traditions, engaged with the world.

When Merton asked Thich Nhat Hanh what he had learned in his first year in the monastery, Nhat Hanh replied: “How to open and close doors quietly.” This struck Merton – and it still strikes me today – as a profound insight into our spiritual lives. This young Buddhist

monk was not consumed with studying great texts or memorizing chants and liturgies (although, of course, he had done that too.) He wasn't focusing on becoming a spiritual master. He was practicing his faith with his thought (mind), will (heart), and actions (body) – with his life, and he was doing it in little, ordinary ways.

(Praying with Our Hands, John Sweeney, pg. 72)

I shared this story with Karin who, to her credit, agreed to join me in spending the rest of the week, “learning how to open and close doors quietly.” Occasionally, one of us would forget and then the door closing sounded thunderous. Yet, what was amazing to me was how such an ordinary thing, like paying attention to opening and closing doors quietly, began to slow me down, focus my attention, and influence my whole day. I became much more aware of the presence of the holy in the seemingly ordinary.

This encounter had a significant impact on Merton, who began to focus on his breath as a way to pay spiritual attention to his very act of living. Later in his life, Merton said, “How I pray is breathe.” By faith, Merton came to breathe the Spirit day in and day out, moment in and moment out.

On the faith journey, we are supported and challenged by the witnesses who are still with us, and those who have gone before us. But there is another cloud of witnesses. It is a cloud that most of the New Testament writers would not have considered. They were expecting the end times to come soon. Some of them couldn't have imagined that we would still be here two thousand years later. The other cloud of witnesses is those who are yet to come. We can imagine

them, and we hope for them. What will they have to say about the ways in which we have “kept the faith?”

For example, with our increasing awareness of environmental issues we wonder what they will say about our witness in our stewardship of creation. Maybe we would be wise to listen to our Native American brothers and sisters. In the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy we find these words: “In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.” That changes the perspective.

What will the congregation here at First Parish be like in one hundred and fifty years? What witness from us will give them courage and strength to run with perseverance their race? What witness from them (in our imaginations) will give us new perspective for our journey?

So, here we are - surrounded by several clouds of witnesses:

- those who are still with us,
- those who have gone before us,
- and those who are yet to come.

We are engaged in dialogue and ministry with and on behalf of the people of God through all time.

Therefore, let us 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.