

August 19, 2007
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Hebrews 11:1-2, 29-12:2

The Old Meeting House
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Clouds of Witness

“Clouds of Witness” is one of my all-time favorite faith phrases. It fits my sometimes murky perception of just how God works and moves among us. I first came to appreciate it when I was getting my B.A. in religious studies. I decided it would be hypocritical of me to say things in church that I did not fully understand or believe. So I stood in worship each Sunday with my lips zipped a lot of the time.

Then I got my B.A., headed to Seminary and over time came to see things a little differently. Not that I necessarily understood theological concepts, dogma or precepts more definitively; on the contrary, I became increasingly aware—as happens with education—of what I did not know. And that in itself is perhaps the most important cultivator of faith. When we are aware of our own limitations, when we are humbled by circumstance, fate or fear, when we surrender the feeble and foolish pretense that we are totally in control, we are then ready to turn to God for help, to Jesus, to someone or something outside of ourselves. As I read more and more about the history and witness of the Christian faith, of the saints and apostles, the martyrs and monks, I took solace in their faith, if not in my own. I came to see their lives as a kind of arbor arching before me through time, through which I would pass, protected by their faith. This painting that my mother painted years ago of the cherry trees in Central Park puts an image to what I was envisioning. That the idea suggests a cloud of witness or cherry blossoms, not a crystal vision, is just as it should be. Because those who have come before us, struggling to live faithfully in the world, wrestling demons of oppression, war, sin, destruction and yet fighting, praying and working for peace, were human beings. They were flawed mortals, clouded by all that clouds you and me: jealousies, doubts, longings, fears, sorrows, desires, angers and resentments. They surely had more faith than I; and I came to see that I could walk through the arbor of their belief and be protected on my journey. Their faith

became my shield and, ironically, gave me the freedom to question and develop my own understanding and beliefs.

The cloud of witness that is attested to in the letter to the Hebrews acknowledges exemplars of faith who labored on in the face of daunting circumstances. What they shared in common was their ability to stay faithful in the face of unfulfilled promises. They lived and died not having their hopes and dreams fulfilled. Yet, they acknowledged their present breath and the future yet to come as belonging to a faithful God.

This past week in the news has been particularly devastating. Time and again I have wondered how people are managing to carry on. The death toll continues to rise in Pakistan following the horrendous monsoon rains. It is reported that tens of thousands of homes have been swept away, 1,500 people have died and 4 million people have been affected.

The controversy over the proposed mosque that is to be built at Ground Zero in New York escalated as Mayor Bloomberg sought desperately to quell fears and opposition. The idea of putting a mosque in the site of the destruction is jarring and unsettling and I find myself alternately agreeing with both sides of the debate. Inherent in this conflict is the very nature of reconciliation and forgiveness as it is balanced with respect for those who died and the raw wounds their families still bear.

This week brought more suicide bombings in Afghanistan as well as the murder of 10 foreign doctors from the International Assistance Mission, the deaths of 6 US troops, and the death of a second American sailor.

President Obama and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continue their dangerously flirtatious interactions about Iran's nuclear advancement and the efficacy and advisability of meeting face to face.

And the crisis in the gulf got still more peculiar as we were told that, miraculously, the oil has gone away, vanished. How can that be? It makes me a little crazy because I know oil—motor oil, olive oil--and how difficult it is to get rid of it. I find it hard to believe that somehow, against all odds, it has dissipated and that what's more, the dispersants evaporated too.

Reading and listening to the news this week has been jarring. I've felt myself on edge and irritable because not only am I incapable apparently of doing anything, I find it difficult to wrap my mind around the ethical and spiritual issues involved. Nothing seems entirely clear, it's cloudy and fuzzy and I long for precision and definition.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."
Sometimes just hearing words like this calms my spirit.

"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. . ."

Maybe the sin that clings so closely to many of us is the worry and fretting and wringing of hands--whether about the world or our own lives--that keeps us paralyzed with fear and frustration. I have spoken with several people recently who are depressed. Several of them have experienced recent loss and trauma and feel the weight of grief bearing down upon them. But what they can't shake, what seems to be clinging to them, is their fear of being depressed.

In the last twenty years the ravages of entrenched depression have been brought to our collective awareness. What was once spoken of in hushed tones now has been recognized as an illness and brought to the light in the hopes of removing the stigma and the perceived sense of hopelessness that surrounds it. Varying treatments are readily available and this is a great advancement and help to many. Along the way to public education, the seriousness of the disease has not been soft-pedaled. What we have learned is that we are all vulnerable to depression at times, though admittedly some people are more prone to its tenacious grasp than others. But depression is not always a symptom of mental illness; it is a legitimate, useful and sometimes curative emotion. A couple of months ago a friend of mine's husband died suddenly and weeks after he died one of her biggest fears was that of getting depressed. And when she confided this, I could see her effectively put quotation marks around the word "depressed." I told her that I thought it was entirely appropriate for her to be depressed, that in fact depression was a natural and healing way for us to slow down and rest, however uncomfortably, with that which

afflicts us. Charlie Brown was right, there really is “Good Grief.” It is the fear of being depressed, the anxiety with which we view this natural emotion that is the problem.

Paul is saying that somehow we need to move forward, if not in a race, at least in small steps. Sometimes we are able to do this only when we feel ourselves protected and sheltered.

We all have clouds of witnesses in our lives: parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, pastors, people who have taught us something, been with us through difficult times, inspired us, consoled us. If you think of them, chances are you won’t remember so much what they said as you will simply remember them, the presence of them, the blessing of their having been with you. Have you ever looked up at the clouds in the sky and made out faces and shapes? Who makes up your cloud of witnesses? Who are the people who have been in some way saints to you? Simply remembering them may well get you unstuck from the stalled state of ineffectual existence in which so many of us find ourselves from time to time.

A few years ago I did something on a whim. Did you ever listen to NPR’s program “This I Believe” and wonder to yourself, “What do I believe?” If you had to submit an essay for this show, what would it say? It’s an overwhelming proposition; at least it was for me, after all I’m a minister and it should be clear to me what I believe. How could I possibly distill everything I believe into 500 words? What do I believe, anyway? Definitely not something I wanted to tackle though I did feel negligent in not addressing the challenge. Then one day I realized that I didn’t have to sum it all up at once—that I didn’t need to run a race, but just start walking. I realized that the problem was not that I don’t believe in anything but that I believe in a lot of things and these beliefs change and alter over time. So I wrote this little essay and sent it in.

Like most women of her generation, my grandmother, whom I called Nonie, was an excellent seamstress. Born in 1879 in Galveston, Texas, she made most of her own clothes. Widowed at 43 and forced to count every penny, she sewed her three daughters’ clothes and some of their children’s as well.

I can knit but I cannot sew new creations from tissue paper patterns. Whenever I try, I break out in a sweat and tear the paper. It clearly requires more patience, more math, more exactitude than I seem willing or capable of giving.

Recently, though, I have come to relish the moments when I sit down and, somewhat clumsily, repair a torn shirt, hem a skirt, patch a pair of jeans; and I realize that: I believe in mending. The solace and comfort I feel when I pick up my needle and thread clearly exceeds the mere rescue of a piece of clothing. It is a time to stop, a time to quit running around trying to make figurative ends meet; it is a chance to sew actual rips together. I can't stop the war in Iraq; I can't reverse global warming; I can't solve the problems of my community or the world, but I can mend things at hand; I can darn a pair of socks.

Accomplishing small tasks, in this case saving something that might otherwise have been thrown away, is satisfying and, perhaps, even inspiring.

Mending something is different from fixing it. Fixing it suggests that evidence of the problem will disappear. I see mending as a preservation of history and a proclamation of hope. When we mend broken relationships we recognize that we're better together than apart, and perhaps even stronger for the rip and the repair.

When Nonie was 78 and living alone in a small apartment in New Jersey, a man smashed the window of her bedroom where she lay sleeping and raped her. It was so horrific, as any rape is, that even in our pretty open, highly verbal family, no one mentioned it. I didn't learn about it for almost 5 years. What I did notice, though, was that Nonie stopped sewing new clothes. All she did was to mend anything she could get her hands on, as though she could somehow soothe the wound, piece back together her broken heart, soul and body by making sure that nothing appeared unraveled or undone as she had been.

Mending doesn't say, "This never happened," it says instead, as I believe the Christian cross does, "Something or Someone was surely broken here, but with God's grace it will rise to new life." So too my old pajamas, the fence around the garden, the

friendship torn by misunderstanding, a country being ripped apart by economic and social inequity and a global divide of enormous proportions, they all need mending.

I'm starting with the pajamas.

What I can add this morning that might not have been appropriate for the radio piece is that as people of faith you know this already. You know that we are all torn a bit here and there, that we are broken and in need of mending. One of the cornerstones of the Christian faith is that no matter how destroyed we may feel, with God's grace we can be restored to new life. We come here each Sunday to be reminded of this and to hear the testimony of saints and strangers, of the cloud of witnesses that have through the ages, turned their faces and hearts to the heavens as they have walked humbly and faithfully with their God.

Amen.