

## COMMUNING IN THE CLOUD

Hebrews 12:1-13  
Mark 12:28-34

David B. Keller  
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TEXT: Hebrews 12:1 “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.”

PURPOSE: To affirm the presence of the cloud of witnesses as both support and challenge for our faithful following of Jesus.

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My Appalachian Trail hike this summer was often a hike in clouds. That was not a big deal unless I was climbing up to a view. Fortunately, the skies were clear for most of the big views. The literal high point of this section of my hike took me over Mount Greylock, the highest mountain in Massachusetts. The night before the final hike to the summit, a bunch of us huddled in a shelter while a terrific storm assaulted the mountain. In the morning, the rain was gone, but we were shrouded in a mist that reduced visibility to near zero.

I am older than most AT hikers, as well as a more early riser, so I am usually the first hiker out of camp and on the trail. I made my way up Greylock, hoping that the clouds would break and that my climb would be rewarded with spectacular views. But the summit remained shrouded as I came up on it. Oh well, such are the unpredictables of long-distance hiking. Along with trails, there is a road up to Greylock’s summit. As I sat at a picnic table in the clouds and munched on some snacks, a family who had driven up came by and chatted with me. A little later, the hikers who had shared the shelter with me pulled in and pulled out their food. Oblivious to the lack of grand views, we were communing in the clouds, enjoying each other’s company and enjoying playing to the tourists. As we relaxed around that table, the clouds did open up, and we got some big views before we continued on our hike.

This morning, we here are doing a different kind of communing in a different kind of cloud. Our text from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. These are those of whom we say we believe when, in the Apostle’s Creed, we say that we “believe in the communion of saints.” On this communion Sunday, we are celebrating All Saints’ Day, an ancient Christian festival which, for Protestants, offers an opportunity to give thanks not only for the giants of our faith, but also for people special to us who have died and now rest in God’s eternal care.

Joining us today at the communion table are Abel and Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses' mother and Moses himself, people whom the eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews honors as those who "died in faith, without having received what they had promised," but who glimpsed the fulfillment of those promises from far off. (Hebrews 11:13) Also at the table are the great prophets and martyrs of old, and beside them, the earliest followers of Jesus, men and women who risked so much to proclaim and live the way of the crucified Christ. You also might catch a glimpse of faithful folk through the ages: Saints Francis, Benedict, Claire, and Hildegard, the reformers – Jan Huss, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, as well as people from more recent times who have risked themselves for the sake of the Gospel: Antionette Brown and Harriet Tubman, Jonathan Edwards and Roger Williams, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador.

It's a great throng of people, but then, it's a huge table to which we all are invited. Here, in this sanctuary, we only see a tiny portion of it. It's a table big enough to seat an even wider gathering of those who have gone before. Way too often, we think that the word "saint" must be reserved for those who got on the Church's official list of saints, or at least, for towering figures of the faith, people way more devoted to following Jesus than we think we could be. But the Bible consistently uses the term "saint" to describe the same group of people whom we would describe with the word "Christian"--common, ordinary followers of Jesus Christ whom God has called and sanctified for a holy purpose. By the way, "saint" never appears in the singular in scripture, never as a title or as a description of one extraordinary person.

There are places at the table for those whose names we will read in worship today. They are among the cloud in which we are communing this morning. They may have mattered only to a small circle of family and friends, but they are nonetheless numbered among the saints of God. We will read my grandmother Sarah Keilman's name along with those closer to this community. I do not recall Meme reading her Bible, or leading our family in prayer. I know that she was a woman with strong opinions about everyone from truck drivers to politicians, a woman with a huge love for her family, a person who gave me a clear picture of how to accept life on its own terms and live well until you die. When I was a child and we visited my grandparents' house for a weekend, my grandfather would take us to church on Sunday mornings while Meme stayed home to cook a big Sunday dinner. Her dining room table is the picture I have of what the table in heaven where we gather for the

great feast will look like.

Is Sarah Keilman numbered among the saints, praising God in glory everlasting? Is she rubbing heavenly shoulders with the ancient martyrs and the great teachers, standing on equal footing with people who chose to be killed rather than renounce Jesus as their Lord and Savior? The classification of saints is not the business of any human being. So today, we are free to imagine all our departed loved ones fully alive in the presence of Almighty God, a great cloud of witnesses with whom we commune, a great company who are cheering us to faithfulness in our lives.

And today, as we share the loaf and the cup, we invite ourselves to imagine that we are taking our places at table with the saints of God. After all, we are among those whom God has called by name. We are common, ordinary followers of Jesus Christ, whom God has called and sanctified for holy purposes. Basic to the power of the Lord's Supper is our trusting that there is more to what is real than what we can see. "Faith," declares the writer of the Book of Hebrews, (11:1) "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." What we see in the celebration of holy communion is pieces of bread and little cups of juice and a congregation of people receiving those elements who are not particularly extraordinary in our faith. But when we receive the bread and the cup, we believe that we are receiving more than we see; we believe that we are, through this simple, sacred meal, participating in the life of Jesus Christ, and communing in a great cloud of witnesses who already feast with him in perfect communion.

The point of our All Saints' Day celebration is to strengthen our faith. It is no easy thing these days to see our living from the perspective of eternity. But that may be just the perspective we need to keep us from being crushed under the stresses of the day and assigning too great a significance to the troubles that distress us. The perspective of eternity may be just what we need to move us to greater faithfulness and devotion, to more fervent love of God and more wholehearted love of neighbor.

The author of the Book of Hebrews reminded that faltering congregation that the old heroes of the faith knew themselves as sojourners in this world, people who were longing for another country, that is, a heavenly one. Now, those heroes are part of the great cloud of witnesses who urge us to faithfulness in our time. Faithfulness for us is no different than faithfulness was for them. "Let us," say the author, "run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who

for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” In the conversation with a scribe that we heard this morning, Jesus told us what is involved in running the race of faith: it is to love God with everything we’ve got, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Mark 12:29-31)

Loving as Jesus loves is no walk in the woods. It is as demanding as a marathon. That’s why Hebrews talks about laying aside the sin that clings so closely, and submitting to the discipline that God gives to build us up for the life of faith. But also, along the way, God gives us the blessing of communing in the cloud. As I was encouraged by companions in the clouds surrounding Mount Greylock, God give us companions to encourage us on our way. That’s why we commune with the saints today. These saints who have gone before have experienced faith’s demands and disappointments as well as its blessings and consolations. Their witness reminds us that the race is worth running, and that the destination is our true home.

On our side of the table, we come hungry for the bread of real life, and perhaps more than a little intimidated by the race that is set before us. From their side of the table, we hear the saints’ songs of joy and cheers of encouragement, and the gentle but persistent reminder that being convinced of things we can’t see transforms the way we live, the choices we make, and the issues to which we assign ultimate importance.

Not just on All Saints’ day, but every day that we come to this table, we commune with friends on earth and friends in heaven. We receive here a foretaste of God’s heavenly feast. We hear the names of the saints in heaven, and we increase our longing to be numbered among the saints on earth—ordinary Christians responding to extraordinary grace with fervent love. And as we leave this holy meal, once again, our hearts are brave, our arms are strong, and we know the embrace of God’s eternal love, love in which we find real life, love we share in faith with this wonderful and broken world for which our savior Jesus continues to give himself. Thanks be to God.