

## Proper 15, Year C

- Many of you have heard me talk about the Book of Hebrews before now, and while I can't always promise many things, I can promise you that you will hear me talk about it again – any minute now, in fact
- The author – or preacher, depending on whether you view Hebrews as a letter or a sermon – is building to the climax in the reading we just heard, and it's an incredible capstone to the work of art that the entire book is
- We heard last week that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” and then the author/preacher goes on to weave a rich tapestry of exemplars in the faith:
  - Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses are all sketched out for us as people who knew what faith is
  - And after such examples, we come to this passage:
    - By faith, the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea
    - By faith, the walls of Jericho were brought down
    - By faith, Rahab survived and did not perish
    - “Do you see what faith can do?” the author/preacher must almost be shouting at this point
    - Think about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets – “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight”
  - All those who came before us in faith, all of them are witnesses to the faith and examples for us to follow
  - And then, this: “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, 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, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”
  - “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”
  - One of the greatest turns of phrase in all of Scripture – “so great a cloud of witnesses”
  - Such a great phrase that it's actually the title of a supplemental liturgical resource in the Episcopal Church – a book that contains the commemorations of a number of saints who aren't yet a part of our official churchwide calendar, and yet whose example we as a

church think it's important to lift up

- That phrase – “a great cloud of witnesses” – is part of the basis for what we call in our creed “the communion of saints” – the idea that we are indeed surrounded and even borne up by the faithful who have preceded us
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- I've been thinking about that phrase a lot this week – “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”
- As many of you know, I drove up to Cleveland this past week to get together with some family to celebrate my grandmother's 90th birthday
- And it was excellent to get four generations of my family together and reminisce a bit, and realize how much we still have in common despite not seeing each other nearly as often as we'd like
- But it was especially incredible to be there to celebrate with my grandmother – to think about her 9 decades worth of knowledge – and about how much she knows, yes, but even more about how much she loves – Joan Lasch is certainly very wise, but more than anything she is kind – and I've been thinking since about how much wisdom there is in kindness
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- And just in case that wasn't enough to get me thinking about the idea of a great cloud of witnesses, my sons Elias and Ezra have both also, within the past week or so, discovered and fallen in love with the Pixar movie *Coco*
- In fact, the soundtrack to the movie was also the soundtrack to our road trip – the theme song to the movie is called, “Remember Me,” and after this week I couldn't forget it if I tried
- But without spoiling the plot too thoroughly, *Coco* is about a the Mexican holiday of *Dia de Muertos*, or Day of the Dead
- A day when many families will put up an *ofrenda* or altar with pictures of deceased family members, because the Day of the Dead is the day on which their loved ones can come back and celebrate with them
- And *Coco* tells the story of Miguel, a boy who loves nothing more than music born to a family that absolutely hates music – partly because Miguel's great great grandfather was a musician who abandoned his family
- And on *Dia de Muertos*, Miguel ends up trying to track down his great great grandfather

in order to get his blessing to become a musician

- If you haven't seen it, you should, because it's essentially about the power of memory – not of individual memories, but rather the collective power we all have in keeping memories of loved ones alive – and about how much we can learn from all those who come before us
- In other words, it's about the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us
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- It's interesting, to say the least, that our lectionary pairs this passage about the great cloud of witnesses with Jesus's talk about dividing households parents against children
- It's easy to forget, perhaps, that both Luke's Gospel and the Book of Hebrews were written at a time when Christian persecution was, if not commonplace, at least a lot more widespread than we have experience with
- Jesus and the author of Hebrews are both speaking to the risk that comes with the territory if we're really following Christ
- We don't have a guarantee from God that if we do what Christ asks, nothing bad will happen to us
- Almost the opposite, in fact – Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth, and Hebrews references Christians being tortured, mocked, flogged, chained, imprisoned, persecuted, tormented, and killed
- Following where Christ leads, all the way to the margins and beyond them – to sinners, and tax collectors, and prostitutes – following to all the places we're told we aren't supposed to go isn't liable to win us many friends – isn't liable to make us famous or what the rest of the world would call successful
- But if we do follow Christ wherever he leads – we'll find we aren't alone
- Our ancestors in the faith – such a great cloud of witnesses – are already there, waiting for us to join them, shouting to us as we approach, “Do you see what faith can do?”