

The Clouds
Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2
Pentecost +13C
Sunday, August 14, 2016
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

I have a hard time with either/or language when it comes to faith. Either you're a saint, or you're a sinner. Either you're in, or you're out. Either you're faithful, or you're faithless. Either you're bound for heaven, or you're bound for hell. I'm so tired of those old dichotomies and don't find them helpful anymore. We know better. We know that we're all on a continuum between all these things and that life is much more both/and than either/or. We know that life is nuanced. We know that we're sinners and saints all at once. I think it's important to hold that in one hand as we turn to Hebrews 11 and 12 with the other. The talk of perfection and fighting a clinging sin can launch us toward thinking of division and camps, teams and winners, and far too much self-criticism. So I'd like to propose we name that leaning toward dualism and then work together toward a better understanding of what the biblical writer was offering his or her listening audience.

The text reads like the middle of a sermon, and sermons are mean to be communicated aloud between a speaker and a people, so we're automatically behind in just reading the text and then in only reading a few paragraphs instead of many. The writer, unknown to us and whose identity is heavily debated, starts slow in describing the beginning of all things—"the worlds that were prepared by the word of God."¹ He reminds us of the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the children of Israel being led out of Egypt. Then the pace begins to build as he tells of the day the walls of Jericho came a tumblin' down, Rahab hiding the spies in peace. He starts moving even faster naming Gideon, Samson, Jephtha, David, Samuel, the prophets, and on and on—too many to name. A litany of people "of whom the world was not worthy." And this, this list, this legacy, this cast of characters—flawed and textured and nuanced as we are; saints and sinners all at once—this is the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. This is the group that goes ahead of us and is drawing us onto the way of God. It's a great invitation.

But you see, there's another cloud. The Hebrews preacher doesn't call it that, so I'm adding a little flare to the text for our understanding. But the writer connects the cloud

¹ Hebrews 11.3

of witnesses to this other reality through a shared root word of surrounding and clinging. We are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses **and** a “sin that clings so closely.” See, there’s another lingering, surrounding, clinging cloud that welcomes us, too. The writer links the first cloud to the second, and in doing so is telling us that the champions of the faith are just as close to us as everything that pulls us off of the path.

The sin that clings so closely. That word “sin” threatens to launch us back to the either/or dualism. But we said we aren’t going to do that—we aren’t going to read the text in that way. So let’s sit with it a minute, first. The choice is not either we follow the cloud of witnesses toward God’s Way OR we give into our animal instincts and wallow in sin. That’s too easy, too simple, too elementary. The sin here is *hamartia*—missing the mark. We know this word, many of us. This is the archer’s term—aiming toward a goal, but the arrow shoots over, under, to the left, or to the right. Misses. On the path, but the path veers. Aiming, but falling short. On the way, but dropping off.

And the writer tells us this veering, missing way clings to us so closely. Just like it did to that great cloud of witnesses. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the people of Israel, Rahab, the prophets, and on and on—they missed, too. They knew the *hamartia* cloud just like they knew the witnessing cloud, and these are the ones who have shown us how to live in between these clouds.

Maybe it’s a funny thing to hear a preacher say, but I don’t particularly like talking about sin. It’s not because I don’t believe in our darkness, our shadow selves, or the ways in which we miss the mark. It’s that I know what happens when a preacher shows up at a cocktail party. I know what happens when the person next to me on an airplane realizes they’re sitting next to a pastor for the next two hours. I know how people sometimes literally bow a little and introduce me as The Reverend (or, comically and awkwardly, The Reverendress), and the real life stops. The real conversation drops off. The formality and performance replaces it because somehow my physical presence as a pastor brings up all of that dualism we said we weren’t going to hold onto as we read this text. I step into this place of representing a perfection that the writer of Hebrews says no one has achieved—not even the cloud of witnesses. We are being made whole, we are being redeemed, it is an unfolding process that has not finished. And yet, I realize I conjure up that self-criticism when I say words like Sin and Perfection because there is a cultural suspicion that I’m on the other side of those things and have my life all figured out, my ducks all in a row, and my stuff all together. Well, let’s put that foolish notion aside just like we did with the either/or reading of this text. We are saints and sinner all at once, my friends, especially me. Hear me saying, I am in this with you and do not stand here as one who has mastered life.

I know the sin that clings so closely to me. Therefore, it's important for us to name some of the ways sin manifests and is described in scripture. Sin is like an arrow being launched toward a goal but missing its mark, yes. It's also my own tendencies to reach above my humanity and act in the place of God and live beneath my humanity and hide from my fullest self. The sin that clings so closely to me is my own fight or flight reaction to being limited to a boxed identity or defining myself by how I think others perceive me. The sin that clings so closely to me whispers to me of false self and false identity and distracts me from the path I'm on. That's why the Hebrews preacher says we are running a race before us that requires perseverance.

It's perfect that we come across this text in the middle of the Olympics. By now we're moving into the track and field competitions and see the focused, strong, fierce runners. Last week we all saw Michael Phelps preparing for a big swim wearing headphones beneath his big puffy coat with his serious, game face on. The author of Hebrews uses language of focus and race and endurance to describe what it takes to navigate life between these surrounding, clinging clouds. Growing into the fullness of self, accepting the image of God that is within each of us, loving and serving the world in faithful ways does not happen immediately and isn't a straightforward trajectory. With intention and perseverance, we move toward that goal. This is also not my competition against you to see if I become more godly than you or the first one to achieve Christ-likeness.

Frederick Buechner comments, "'Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,' he says (Hebrews 12:1), where the object is not to get there first but just to get there. And 'Fight the good fight,' he says (1 Timothy 6:12), where it's not the fight to overcome the best of the competition that he's talking about but the fight to overcome the worst in ourselves." You see, we're a team together, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have already run this race, and we are struggling against the *hamartia* that clings to us. Two clouds. Saints and sinners all at once.

Brian Whitfield adds, "The writer of Hebrews has one final word of advice. There is one more photograph for us to see, the final and most important one of all: 'Let us run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.' *Pioneer* translates a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*. The *archegos* is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the impetus, the trailblazer who goes before us...In the context of a race, the *archegos* is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates

as they followed in his steps.”² The Hebrews Preacher says Christ himself cheers us on our journey and believes in us as we zig and zag like the crooked arrows that we are.

Why does it have to be this hard? Why must we talk about racing and focus and clinging? Why perseverance and cheering on? Because this life is hard. And we give up quickly. We sing together over and over through the years: “Prone to wander, Lord we feel it, prone to leave the God we love.” We get locked in, excited, determined we are on this path together to change the world in Jesus’ name, and then we are swept away in a different direction on the next breeze. This is life. This is what happens. It happens to me all the time. Every week. Sometimes daily. I feel drawn into that cloud of witnesses and sense God’s thumbprint within my soul, and half a day later I’m itchy and restless and longing for something else. And the folks in that great cloud of witnesses were the exact same way. These are our people. Saints and sinners all at once. They know. They’ve done it already and been as distracted and zig-zagging as we know we are. And they surround us even now to invite us to keep moving forward, no matter how crooked and slow our pace may be.

Take comfort, my friends.

Take comfort in the cloud that surrounds you.

Take comfort in the One waiting for you and cheering you on.

Take comfort in the zig zag community of saints and sinners who gather in this place.

Take comfort in knowing you are not alone as we move along this path together.

Amen.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=657