

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 30, 2021.

SURROUNDED BY WITNESSES

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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Hebrews 12:1-2

Today we gather to worship on Memorial Day Weekend. Kathleen and I moved to Attica in the fall of 1980. The following May I was surprised at how many families went to the cemeteries around Memorial Day to plant flowers on the gravestones of their families. My first reaction to this was that I thought this must be some Western New York custom like fish fries, beef on weck, Dyngus Day, sponge candy and butter lambs. When I said to Kathleen this seems so strange, my family never went to graveyards to plant flowers. She gently reminded me that the reason was that when I was little all our family graves were in Sweden and Scotland. I had to admit she was right again.

There are many stories as to how Memorial Day actually had its beginning. There are over two dozen towns and cities that claim to have started the observance. It is likely that towns across the country spontaneously gathered people to honor those who had died in the Civil War. But the Government wanted to give credit to one community. So in 1966, Congress and President Lyndon Johnson declared Waterloo, N.Y., just down the thruway, to be the “birthplace” of Memorial Day. There, a ceremony on May 5, 1866, honored local veterans who had fought in the Civil War. The day was first called Decoration Day in recognition of what occurred at the graves.

The practice of decorating graves on Memorial Day is built on the very common practice of human beings putting items on final resting places as an act of remembrance. One of the purposes of Memorial Day is to remember and honor the sacrifices of those who have come before us and to recognize those who gave their time and lives for a greater good.

On Memorial Day we remember all those who have come before us. This leads to our text for this morning. **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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**

The words surrounded by a cloud of witnesses reminds us that we are not alone in our journey of faith. We do not live solitary lives of faith rather we are connected to our brothers and sister in faith who have come before us.

The words “cloud of witnesses” can be read on several levels. One message of the cloud of witnesses is how important it is for us to remember those who are gone.

People go to graveyards, plant flowers and remember. Roger Sillars, Pastor of this congregation and the father of Bob, wrote an article for American Legion magazine that calls on us to remember. It is called 'Memorial Day Dreams.'

**They were dreamers. These young men we remember.
They would gather on the fantail of the ship as it coursed through the iridescent sea on a warm, tropical nights and they would talk, talk of many things that might be, dream of what might come in a better world.
They would shout and yell, snap their towels as they showered after a hard day of training. Then that night they would gather and talk of a dream.**

**They would huddle in a hut while the typhoon spent its fury outside and they would talk, talk of a world with better ways to live.
They would stand in their mud and sweat encrusted clothes and watch others carry a bag, knowing that inside was a body of a friend. They would pause and then talk and dream of a world at peace.
We try to remember these fresh, young faces – so young many hadn't known a razor for long.**

**We know they are buried – and some missing – on little bits of islands, in France, on Okinawa, in Korea, in Vietnam.
We mustn't let their dreams be buried with them.
They were realistic. They really never expected to be remembered too well aside from their mothers and their wives.
But they wouldn't want us to forget their dreams.
All over the world their discarded tanks and landing craft and equipment rust and rot.
But we must never discard their dreams.
They are dead, but we give them life when we remember their dreams.**

When we remember those who came before us, we are surround by witnesses. These memories can inspire and teach us.

For many years Ben Stein wrote a biweekly column for an online website called "Monday Night At Morton's." (Morton's is a famous chain of Steakhouses known to be frequented by movie stars and famous people from around the globe.) A couple of years after 9/11 Ben terminated the column to move on to other things in his life.

The final column was called "How Can Someone Who Lives in Insane Luxury Be a Star in Today's World?" It makes the case that true heroes to be remembered are those who sacrifice for others. I would like to share with you a long passage from the article.

How can a man or woman who makes an eight-figure wage and lives in insane luxury really be a star in today's world, if by a "star" we mean someone bright and powerful and attractive as a role model? Real stars are not riding around in the backs of limousines or in Porsches or getting trained in yoga or Pilates and eating only raw fruit while they have Vietnamese girls do their nails.

They can be interesting, nice people, but they are not heroes to me any longer. A real star is the soldier of the 4th Infantry Division who poked his head into a hole on a farm near Tikrit, Iraq. He could have been met by a bomb or a hail of AK-47 bullets. Instead, he faced an abject Saddam Hussein and the gratitude of all of the decent people of the world.

A real star, the kind who haunts my memory night and day, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordinance on a street near where he was guarding a station. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad.

We put couples with incomes of \$100 million a year on the covers of our magazines. The noncoms and officers who barely scrape by on military pay but stand on guard in Afghanistan and Iraq and on ships and in submarines and near the Arctic Circle are anonymous as they live and die.

I am no longer comfortable being a part of the system that has such poor values, and I do not want to perpetuate those values by pretending that who is eating at Morton's is a big subject.

There are plenty of other stars in the American firmament...the policemen and women who go off on patrol in South Central and have no idea if they will return alive; the orderlies and paramedics who bring in people who have been in terrible accidents and prepare them for surgery; the teachers and nurses who throw their whole spirits into caring for autistic children; the kind men and women who work in hospices and in cancer wards.

Think of each and every fireman who was running up the stairs at the World Trade Center as the towers began to collapse. Now you have my idea of a real hero.

We are not responsible for the operation of the universe, and what happens to us is not terribly important. God is real, not a fiction; and when we turn over our lives to Him, He takes far better care of us than we could ever do for ourselves. In a word, we make ourselves sane when we fire ourselves as the directors of the movie of our lives and turn the power over to Him.

I came to realize that life lived to help others is the only one that matters.

Ben Stein has it right. The "Cloud of witnesses" have inspired him to be a better person. Learning the stories of the cloud of witnesses can give us inspiration for running our own race.

Lastly the cloud of witnesses is present with us now. The resurrection of Jesus has penetrated the façade between this world and the next. Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by such a great a cloud of witnesses. Those who have gone on before us are present with us still.

The words in our Communion Liturgy are quite old. Christians began to worship in English during the time of the reformation in Britain. Most of our wording comes from the pen of Thomas Cranmer who was Archbishop of Canterbury. In a portion of the liturgy just before the Sanctus when the people say “Holy, Holy, Holy”, the liturgy reads, “Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we worship and adore thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying.” And all the company of heaven are the keywords which point to the great cloud of witnesses. It tells us that when we pray, we pray with those who have gone on before us.

I do not know how to say these things without sounding a little bit like a science fiction writer. I am not completely comfortable with it all, yet somehow – in a way we cannot fully understand – we live our lives in this age surrounded by those who have gone on before us. You and I can gain strength for living today by knowing that when we pray, we are praying with Paul and Peter, and our loved ones who have died believing in Jesus. As a good Protestant I would never pray to saints, we do not need another mediator with God. But I gain encouragement for my Christian pilgrimage when I realize that those who came before us can

Teach us,

Encourage us,

And pray with us.

When I visit my hometown now. I often go to Bedford Union Cemetery. Unlike forty years ago there is a reason to visit. In one section are the graves of my father’s parents, his sister, aunts, uncles and cousins. In another section of the Cemetery are the remains of my parents buried beside my mother’s parents. As I walk around, I see the names of my best friends’ parents, the man who owned the drugstore, the woman who ran the hardware store, and the man who owned the gas station. It seems like my whole childhood is in that cemetery.

In that quiet place I as reminisce I am inspired by their lives and remember that when I pray, they are still with me. On this Memorial Weekend we are reminded by the writer of Hebrews that

We are not alone,

You are not alone,

I am not alone,

For we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.