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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
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Hebrews 11.29-12.2
Luke 12.49-56

By Faith—Part II

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.

—Hebrews 12.1

I grew up in the church, but it wasn't until I was in college that I started taking Christianity seriously. (Or, so I thought.) In college I started reading books and pondering big theological ideas. It was as if a whole new world had opened up to me, a world with very little connection to the fairly conventional, upper middle class church of my childhood. I was in the big leagues now: Martin Luther, Soren Kierkegaard, and the higher criticism.

I still look back with great fondness on those years—years when I was introduced to some of the books and ideas that still guide me today. It was a revelation to me to realize that there was a whole—big—world of Christianity that existed outside of the narrow confines of my upbringing. To this day, I try to be a faithful explorer of the whole, wide intellectual horizon of Christianity.

Nevertheless, as I have grown older, I have come to realize the importance of my “mundane” church upbringing. I have come to see my faith—however much it might have expanded in college and graduate school—was given to me much earlier. Far from being disconnected with later developments, my church upbringing made my adult faith possible.

In college, my local church seemed a bit silly and parochial to me: just a bunch of people (mostly old people) going to meetings and taking care of a building. But it was much more than that. It was a community—however imperfect—of Christians trying to live out their faith in daily life. In retrospect, I've come to see the important lessons that those Christians taught me

every week of my formative years: retired ladies taking time to teach the Bible to children, earnest souls trying to make a difference in downtown Seattle by collecting needed items and delivering them to a shelter in the worst part of town, people giving their money to make sure the message of Jesus would be heard in that corner of the world. (It was in that church that I learned to tithe ten percent of my income. Though, I'm not sure that particular lesson was universally learned there—as I've noted it doesn't seem to be universally learned in many churches!)

No, my local church wasn't a trivial distraction from the "real" Christianity of scholars and theologians. My local church *was* Christianity—as real as it gets: people struggling with real issues, trying to find a faithful way in the world. There have been better congregations, I'm sure. There have been worse. But what happened in that little church mattered a lot.

Christianity isn't learned from books. It is learned from other people. Now, don't get me wrong. Books matter too. (My overflowing shelves attest to my belief in that idea!) Christians need to take care with their concepts and need to sharpen their thinking. But the primary crucible of Christian chemistry is the local church—rubbing elbows with other people in various stages of faithful discipleship. For good or for ill, that's how it happens.

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews has occupied us for a couple of weeks. This unusual letter seems to underscore the importance of the kind of faith modeling that goes on in a typical Christian church. Though the author spends most of his time talking about faith exemplars from the Bible, the message is clear: in order to *live* faithful lives, we need to *observe* faithful lives. We look first to the Bible and then we look to each other.

The author of Hebrews lays out the stories of several biblical examples of faith—Abraham, Moses, all the way down to minor characters like Rahab the Harlot. (So much for respectable suburban Christianity!) The letter exhorts its readers to look carefully at this gathering of the faithful and to practice their faithfulness in their own lives. In so doing, we come into closer relationship with Jesus himself:

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, ² 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. (Hebrews 12.1-2)

There is simply no escaping the fact that we need other people to learn our faith. We need a community of discipleship that crosses the boundaries of age, and even, through scripture, the boundaries of time.

It has taken me many years to come to a fuller appreciation of the “cloud of witnesses” that surrounded me as I grew up in church. As you sit here this morning, you may not think that what you do matters very much. But it does. For just behind you, or across the lawn, or way in the back—somewhere there is someone whose faith development depends on your example. Likewise, yours may depend on another person here today.

If the Christian faith were just about books and ideas, we could all more profitably spend our Sunday mornings in the library. But it isn't. The Christian faith is about learning the love of God in the company of other people. And so, we do what we do: we gather steam for one more committee meeting, we haul the chairs out on the lawn, we practice music, we feed the hungry in Springfield, we visit each other in the hospital. Individually, these things are merely small droplets of activity. But you know what you get when you put a lot of small droplets together? You get a cloud. And so we—unlikely selection though we are—we are the “cloud of witnesses” that will carry our faith forward in our time.

Go figure.