

## Witness

### Proper 15, year C – Hebrews 12:1-14

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 14 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The other evening, I was watching one of those news magazine shows on TV. 20/20, Dateline, one of those. One of the themes they were discussing was how America has become a society of individuals who are interested only in themselves, more interested in personal rights than in taking responsibility for their role as part of society. I've seen the same observation made in print many times.

And yet a quick stroll through the bookstore, or a quick *scroll* through your favorite social media, browsing through all the books and memes and comments on how to build *this* relationship, or how to sustain *that* relationship, assures me that people are not happy with that set of circumstances. We live in a schizophrenic society that is both isolated and isolating, where people want to be left alone, but cry out from that loneliness.

Actually, this sort of individualistic attitude has a home in the Christian Church as well. Whether you want to trace back to the revival movement at the turn of the twentieth century, or all the way to the Protestant Reformation, we are heirs of a Christianity that puts the emphasis on our *individual* relationship to God. Slogans like, "Get yourself right with God," and, "Jesus is my personal Savior," underscore the thought that our relationship to Christ is one-on-one.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that there is no such one-on-one component of our relationship with God. I'm here to tell you that I know from personal experience that an individual, one-on-one, *intimate* relationship with Jesus Christ is not only *possible*, it's a true *joy* of the Christian life.

But what all this "Jesus is a personal friend of mine" rhetoric has done is *further* contribute to our isolation. When we come to see our relationship to Christ as being a purely *personal* matter, we come to believe that we get nothing from anyone else – and, perhaps worse yet, that we *owe* nothing to anyone else. We can adopt the attitude that our faith is a *personal* thing, and none of anyone else's business. But then we get to seeing ourselves as superior, more enlightened, more *spiritual* than our neighbor. And *then* we can find ourselves coming to church to engage in our private devotions and worship, without touching, or *being* touched by those others that happen to be met with us here.

*Or*, we can listen to the words of our Epistle lesson this morning. We can remember that we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." We can realize that we are anything *but* alone in our relationship with Christ.

Throughout the ages there have been *countless* witnesses to God's grace, *innumerable* witnesses to his mercy, *incalculable* witnesses to his love. The Church calendar is *filled* with the names of those witnesses. Some of the names you would definitely recognize: apostles, martyrs, kings and queens. Others' names you may never have heard: theologians, missionaries, even Church administrators.

Two thousand years ago, an angel appeared to a young woman, practically a girl, by most accounts. The angel announced that the woman would conceive a son, even though she had never been with a man. Though a preposterous suggestion, the young lady humbly accepted the divine call, and in the process had her own heart pierced as deeply as was her son's. From that time to this, all generations have called her blessed. On August 15th, we celebrate Saint Mary the Virgin, Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one of the great cloud of witnesses.

In 1965 a young seminarian left school in Boston, Massachusetts, to join the civil rights movement at a march in Hayneville, Alabama. He was arrested for taking part in a demonstration, then he and his companions were suddenly released without bail. As they returned to where they were staying, a man stepped from the shadows and leveled a shotgun at 17-year-old black woman in their group. The seminarian stepped between the gun and the girl, and was killed by the 12-gauge blast. On August 14th, we celebrate Jonathan Myrick Daniels, seminarian, many would say martyr, one of the great cloud of witnesses.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a young scholar felt called to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. Barely finishing seminary in time, he became an officer and chaplain in the Confederate Army. Having survived the horrors of war, the priest became a professor at the University of the South in Sewanee. The book of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* calls him “the most original and creative thinker the American Episcopal Church has ever produced.” On August 18th, we celebrate William Porcher DuBose, priest, soldier, scholar, and one of the great cloud of witnesses.

A couple of years ago, the steadfast witness of a fellow servant of the Church turned my own moment of fear and doubt into a resolution of continued service, when stepping aside seemed *oh* so much easier. Last week my own sometimes frenetic and frantic pace was challenged, and my own faith was confirmed, as I experienced the patience and peace of someone who is walking a *much* tougher road than I. Just yesterday, a young man stepped out to do what *most* of us would find distinctly *un-*comfortable, and in doing so, once again challenged *me* to look beyond what is comfortable, to dream of what is *possible* in the name of Christ. About four and a half years ago, a whole *congregation* of faithful Christians wrapped me and mine in *their* love, and set my feet again on the solid path of *Christ's* love.

You see, that great cloud of witnesses isn't made up of just apostles, and martyrs and kings. It isn't made up of just theologians, and missionaries and Church administrators. The great cloud of witnesses is made up of *everyone* who has ever called upon the name of Christ, *everyone* who has ever proclaimed Jesus as Lord, *everyone* who has been baptized into Christ's holy, catholic and apostolic Church. From the most ancient, departed saint, to the youngest, newest member of the body of Christ, we are, *all* of us, witnesses to Christ's redeeming love.

*Some* witness to us across many centuries by their great deeds of faith and courage. *Some* witness to us by their writings of profound deliberation or poetic imagination. *Some* witness to us by the structures and organizations or by the principles and doctrines that they painstakingly pieced together. And *some* witness to us in their day-to-day acts of struggle and grace and mercy and love that have molded and shaped *our* lives and *our* hearts.

Some of the witnesses we remember on our church calendars. Some of them we remember with biographies, poetry, or song. Some we remember in the naming of our churches. And some we remember simply in the quiet backwaters of our memories, in the still, silent places of our own thankful hearts.

I'm not foolish enough to claim that the Christian life is always an easy one. The road on which you may be called to run may at times be narrow and rough. But you are *not* alone. You are surrounded by others, past and present, who can and *will* witness to you of Christ's love, if you will only *listen*.

“And since you are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight that clings to you, and *run* – run with *perseverance* the race that lies before you, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and *perfector* of our faith.” We are *surrounded* by love. So let us run!