

**“A CLOUD OF WITNESSES”**  
**Hebrew 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56**  
**August 15, 2010**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

How many of you have ever been church school teachers? And how many of you have ever wondered what, if anything, the children retain of the Bible stories and religious precepts that you work so hard to teach them? Well, let me tell you a story.

I think I was in the second or third grade when Mrs. Hammond was my Sunday School teacher. And the lesson for the day was this morning’s scripture from the letter to the Hebrews. All that year, we had been studying saints. Episcopalians, at least in those days, were big on telling saint stories in Sunday School. Modern day parental sensibilities would probably be horrified. If you know your saint histories, you know that many of both the canonized and the unacknowledged saints of the church came to brutal ends as martyrs: blinded, branded, cut in half, stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake, boiled in oil . . . you get the idea. There was a lot of violence involved. But that didn’t faze us in the 50s. The saint stories read to us children a lot like superhero comic books: full of action, a battle between good and evil; but in the saint stories, the action was based in passion for God, and a fidelity to God’s purposes that remained true, no matter the consequence. Like most of my classmates, I relished my saints and martyrs.

But then came the day—it was maybe All Saints Sunday—when Mrs. Hammond got to the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. On the large flannel board that was the gold standard of “high tech” equipment in those days, she put up images of a modern day boy and girl, and then she asked us to name our favorite biblical characters and saints. David, Sampson, Gideon, Joshua, Jesus, St. Edmund, St. Stephen, St. Catherine, St. Ann. One by one, the boy and girl were ringed by a circle of those who had been heroes and “sheroes” for God. Through the mystery of the divine purpose, we were told, all those great ones of old hover invisibly around us every minute of every day supporting us, encouraging us, cheering us on as we each run our own race to do great things for God. And if we but listened hard enough, our church school teacher insisted, we could hear them; we could feel their hands at our backs pushing us ever forward to take our place among their number. It was thrilling. It was inspiring. And, in some way, the hope and promise of that day have never completely left me.

I owe Mrs. Hammond a debt of huge proportions, because whenever my life has been difficult, whenever the way ahead has seemed unclear to me, I still carry in a corner of my heart a remembrance of that childhood certainty that I am never alone, and if I but let myself be still, I can sense a hovering presence, hear its whispered encouragement, and feel its invisible touch of love and support.

All week long, I have been remembering that old church school lesson and what it meant to me. In my days as a child in church, through bible stories and those gloriously gory saint stories, we children were told over and over again that we were capable not just of being good people, or brightening our corner of the world. We were told that we were capable of doing great things for God and for the world. I don't know what was being preached to the adults of the church, but for us children the standard was heroic witness. And I have found myself musing all week about that. I don't think our modern day church school curriculum has that kind of focus. I think in both children's and adult's education and worship, we concentrate a lot on making sure we value the variety of kinds of contributions that different people can make and that's good. We are diligent at reminding people that no step forward is so small as to be insignificant. And, again, I understand the encouragement of that. But where is the place, is there a place in the church today, where we encourage each other to be great, where we proclaim the possibility that one or more of us, with the help of God and the community around, might be Christian superheroes? Do we allow ourselves to be buoyed up, propelled into doing greater things than we thought we were capable of through our awareness of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us?

I have no well-reasoned thesis to share with you all this morning. I'm just wanting you to ponder with me whether becoming great saints for God is something that can be taught, and should be taught, and whether we do enough in this community to encourage our children, to encourage each other to dream large, to take risks, to believe that God might have some important work afoot where we will play an integral part.

I have a cousin in San Antonio, Texas. She worked as an emergency room nurse for several years, got married, was a stay-at-home mom, and when her children became school age, she started volunteering her nursing skills at a small, storefront medical clinic in one of the poorest areas of San Antonio. Over the course of five years, she went from volunteer to volunteer coordinator, to director of the clinic. In the 12 years since then, she has multiplied that original storefront facility. The Good Samaritan Community Centers now offer medical and dental services, case management, immigration services, alcohol and drug counseling, day care, after school programs, teen parent programs, and, most recently, adult day care in two large clinics housed in what were once abandoned schools in San Antonio, plus satellite clinics in seven counties. Jill is open about the connection between her faith and her work. "I'm lucky," she will say. "I always believed God wanted me to do something special with my life, and when I worked up enough courage to tell people that, they were gracious enough to encourage me to dream big." She's still dreaming, and the ministries guided by her hands and her faith continue to multiply.

Every Sunday we gather here as community to worship. We sing; we pray; we hear the great stories and teachings of our faith. There are many ways that worship can touch us, many purposes it fills in our lives. But surely one of those purposes is so that we might draw inspiration from our past and to challenge each other—as individuals, as a body—to go beyond what seems easy and doable, to always find new, creative, bold, compassionate ways to be

Christ's hands and feet in this world. So, therefore, my friends, since we are surrounded in this place and in all our life by a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, all that holds us back, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before each of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.