

Gratitude Witness

Series intro. 2020 has been a year in which life has been turned upon its head. We have lost what was normal and are living in a new normal, one which most of us do not like very much. In addition, seemingly odd and sometimes catastrophic events have taken place – two hurricanes striking the same region within weeks of one another, ongoing protests and riots over racial injustice, and a contentious election. If that was not enough, many have struggled with other traumatic life events such as death of those loved, sickness, loss of job, family conflicts, etc.

Given the kind of year we are having; we have had plenty to gripe about. Unfortunately, griping has few if any positive impacts. It seldom changes the situations around us and tends to make all of us depressed as we process the gripes. Is there a practice that can change us and our situation?

Paul wrote to his friends in Thessalonica to “*give thanks in all circumstances.*” Gratitude may be the antidote all of us need. Gratitude has the power to change our attitude and altitude.

During November we are going to focus on “gratitude” in the Sunday messages and how we can be grateful people. I don’t know about you but I’m tired of complaining. I want to be grateful. How can we do so?

Hebrews 12:1–3 (NRSV)

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. **3** Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

The Cloud. In 2011, Apple introduced the iCloud. Since that point, various providers have joined in the Cloud endeavor. Everyday most of us are connected to the Cloud and depend upon it. If you watch a video on Youtube, download a movie on your Smart TV, use mobile banking, do a search for information on Google, use email or texts, then you connect to the cloud. We are literally surrounded by the Cloud.

The Cloud is a network of worldwide computers where information is stored and retrieved, computer programs are accessed and data is processed. The Cloud has a significant impact on our lives and world.

The author of Hebrews uses the metaphor of a “cloud” as well. Like our virtual cloud, the author claims we who follow Jesus are surrounded by it. This cloud influences our lives in powerful ways. As a matter of fact, much of who we are has been shaped by this cloud. So what is the “cloud” of which the author speaks?

The cloud here in Hebrews is a “cloud of witnesses.” These witnesses have gone before us and are all around us. They surround us throughout our lives as we attempt to follow Jesus.

When you hear the word, “witness,” what comes to mind? I immediately think of the person in a court of law who testifies. Either that person has experienced or witnessed something and shares her story with the court. Or the witness may be a person who is an expert in a given field or possesses a particular body of knowledge to be shared with the court.

These two types of witness are central to following Jesus Christ. As Jesus people we are to bear witness to our faith. Part of this involves sharing our faith story. How did you come to know Jesus? How has Jesus been at work in your life? What are your experiences of deliverance by Jesus? Our personal witness are powerful tools the Holy Spirit uses to lead people to Christ and to fuel the growth of believers. Then there is the witness of those who have gained in knowledge of God’s Word and in theology. Today as I share with you, hopefully I am sharing out of this knowledge base and you will be led deeper in your faith.

It seems that the witnesses to which Hebrews is referring is not this type of witness. In previous chapter, we are given a glimpse of these “witnesses” and really nothing is said of their verbal testimony, sharing or teaching. What is highlighted is how they lived out their ordinary lives in God in extraordinary ways. Their very lives and faithfulness to do what God desired were a living witness.

- Abel (*do you remember Cain and Abel*) witnessed as he gave an offering to God from his best and from his heart.
- Abraham witnessed to his trust in God as he left his secure home to follow God to the place He was leading.
- Amram and Jochebed (Moses’ parents) were witnesses as they hid their young son from the deadly decree of Pharaoh.
- Moses witnessed to his faith when he identified with the Jewish people rather than resting in the luxurious life of Egyptian royalty.
- Rahab witnesses as she put her well-being at risk as she welcomed and harbor the Hebrew spies who were scoping out Jericho.

These witnesses paved the way for the development and growth of the Judeo-Christian faith. As believers in Jesus Christ, we owe these witnesses a huge debt. Their stories continue to surround us and inspire us to remain faithful and keep moving toward the goals God has set before us.

Today, we have been celebrating All Saints Sunday. As part of that celebration we have taken time to remember people from this church who have died over the past two years. It has been part of our tradition to do this at some point each year. Among those who have died are

now part of the cloud of witnesses that surround us. I want to share a snapshot of a few of these.

[Betty Henegar joined this church in 1965](#) and gave much of her life in ministry here. In the earlier days of her life here, her and her husband gave themselves in service to youth and influenced a generation of youth and young adults for Jesus. Betty loved and was a faithful anchor for our chancel choir. She was a rock that music director after music director leaned on for support and commitment. Her love for the music and worship of the church is seen in the fact the grand piano in the sanctuary was given in memory of her husband, Bob. It did not take long for anyone talking to Betty to see how deeply she loved Jesus and this church.

[John Noll did not have the long history here as did Betty.](#) He and Sandy arrived here about the same time I did. John had a special gift – hospitality. Whenever he was on this campus, he would greet and make feel welcome both the guest and long-time member. His smile was contagious. He could lift my spirits with the beam that shone forth from his face and his gracious words. It was as if the Christ's love flowed through him into others. In the latter season of his life, John mind began to leave him but the one thing he never lost here was that gift of hospitality. He was a blessing and inspiration.

[Michael Boutwell began attending this church 3 ½ years ago.](#) Even though he went through the steps to become a member, he never made that official step but he claimed this church as his own and is a part of its cloud of witnesses. Michael loved the contemporary service and often made it known. During the summer, it was common to find some fresh veggies that he had grown on his farm placed on the tables in the connection point. He had a heart to share what he had with others. One thing that Michael did well was support this preacher. His words and presence lifted me.

If time would permit, together we could share stories of other witnesses from OUMC who surround and inspire us. This church has been and is blessed with large cloud of witnesses who have live ordinary life in extraordinary ways for Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, this church exists because of them. Had it not been for the cloud of witnesses, there would not be an Ooltewah United Methodist Church. This community of faith where you worship, where you serve and where you grow would not exist without the faithful witness of those who have gone before us.

I wonder, do you feel grateful to God for giving those great witnesses of biblical lore and those here at OUMC who have gone before us? Are you grateful for the great gifts God has given? Do you feel grateful to those who gave their lives here, often making sacrifices of time and treasure to insure you and your family would have a community of faith?

Expressing our gratitude.

If you feel grateful, how can you best express that gratitude?

For most us, expressing our thanks is done through words – whether spoken or written. [To express gratitude by saying, “Thank-you” for a job well-done or writing a note of appreciation are extremely important ways to do so.](#) During this month, we are asking you to do this through social media by expressing your thanks through #grateful.

But there is another way to express your gratitude that is equally and as powerful as words. As a matter of fact, it may speak more powerfully than words for many of us.

In these few verses of scriptures we find the author alluding to it. He writes: [“Run with perseverance the race set before you.”](#) In other words, [live out the life that Jesus has designed you to live, do what he had called and gifted you to do.](#) Live your life fully in him. This is a powerful way to express our gratitude to God and to those who have gone before us.

Patty and I have missionary friends, Ray and Lydia, who have served in Costa Rica for many years. Not long after they arrived in the nation, Ray had the idea that it would be a wonderful experience to take Lydia on a hike through the rainforest to one of the volcanoes southwest of San Jose. He planned well for the strenuous day hike with water and food. They enjoyed their journey and experience at the volcano. But on the way back, evening approached quickly (as it does near the equator) and they found themselves in the dark not knowing how far they were from their destination. They decided to hunker down together in the dark in the rainforest, really a scary thing. The next morning at dawn they continue their journey to discover that just around the bend was their car. They could have walked a few more hundred feet and driven home the night before.

The author's word about perseverance is the exhortation to stick with the race and finish strong. Don't give up or give in early. Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, about his own race: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* (2 Timothy 4:7). Living gratefully involves finishing, and doing so well.

2020 has been a year that has brought challenges unlike most us have ever faced in our lives. With these challenges has come the temptation slow down, drop out of the race or take a detour in our race.

Recently I was talking with some clergy colleagues regarding this Covid-19 season. All of us were sharing how challenging these times have been and how we have worked hard to continue to be the church. A couple of my friends shared that their church had hemorrhaged some folks because of what their church had chosen or not chosen to do in this season. I could sense their pain because I know our own here. People had left because the church was not meeting freely in person and they had gone to other places.

When this happens, I always wonder if those persons are continuing to run the race before them or have chosen to run their own race because their actions typically leave empty places in a church. What if those before them had done the same thing? What if the people in the community to which they now go had done that?

I am thankful for those who do not give up or in on the race.

Keeping our eyes of Jesus.

By staying in the race, we live as grateful people. We leave a legacy behind us that will surround those who follow in the faith.

The race is not easy and there are and will be seasons when we are tempted to quit. Throughout the race we must keep our focus on Jesus. He ran the course before him and finished it despite the great suffering he had to endure. He was determined to reach the goal.

This same Jesus not only gives us inspiration to run our race but he is also the one that designed our course. Let's look to him and keep running.