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## *A Cloud of Witnesses--Glory in the Church!*

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Proper 15C**

*"By faith , by faith , since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
 , 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)*

So great a cloud of witnesses.

A great cloud of witnesses.

Today is a lovely day for me. Once again, I am privileged to stand here at the front of this great cathedral, and gaze out at you. Day after day, Sunday after Sunday, what I see gathered before me are sweet faces. Your faces! Yours are sweet faces today, and I give thanks for you.

But you are more than that, more than just faces. What I see today is a great cloud of witnesses. Today at the Cathedral of St. Philip is what we call "Homecoming Sunday," the day we conclude our slower summer routines and the day we return to the vigor and faster pace of Fall-maybe the race of Fall! God has provided rather Fall-like weather this weekend, just as a message for us! Some of us are new; some of us are old. Some of us have been away for a while. Some of us have just moved to Atlanta. Some of us are being baptized on this celebratory occasion.

Welcome! You are all sweet faces; and, together, we are a cloud of witnesses. Our Scripture lesson for today contains one of the great Bible passages of Christianity. The Letter to the Hebrews recounts, in chapter eleven, many excellent events of faith, reminding us, at the same time, of the difficult challenges of faith. The chapter honors great heroes, people like Abraham who left his home and then even offered to give up what he loved, people like Moses who persevered in courage. Names like Rahab and Gideon and Barak and Samson and David and Samuel pass before us.

And then, in chapter twelve, the writer concludes with one of the most elegant lines of the Bible: "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 , looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Today, I want to add your names, all our names, to that list. Don't worry, I am not going to call out individual names today. But I do want to remind us of who we are surrounded by this morning. We, too, are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. In a few minutes, many of us will gather in the parish hall and be surrounded by faces of faith, all organized in the ministry of the church. That Ministry Fair is but a small example of the witnesses of faith in this place.

Today, we are surrounded by heroes of the faith. You are Sunday School teachers among us. You are lay ministers to the

sick and lonely and bereaved. You are church guilds, so many small groups, little cells of energy and fellowship and faith. You are youth groups and young adult groups. You are musicians and singers. Wait! Many of our choristers are not immediately nearby; many are in England today, concluding a beautiful pilgrimage to St. Paul's Cathedral, London, and Canterbury Cathedral, Canterbury. But they still surround us! And we are surrounded by much faith that goes unnoticed: mothers and fathers and business people and leaders who take their faith daily with them to work.

We witness to an awesome faith today. But it is not a superficial faith. The inner truth here today is that most of us, in faith, have not had an easy time of it. Maybe the experiences described in Hebrews 11 remind us, spiritually, of our own lives. We have been sick or ill, some of us very seriously. Some of us have watched loved ones die. Some of us have been hurt and betrayed. Some of us have had to surmount enormous obstacles to get here today. Our journeys have been complicated and sometimes painful. Jesus, in today's gospel lesson from Luke, speaks of painful division; in some way or another, most of us have experienced that. There is not a soul here who has not suffered, in some way or another.

And yet, and yet, we witness to something when we gather here today. We witness to something greater than our pain and the inevitable hardships of life. When we gather at church, we are claiming together another kind of strength, a grace and love that lifts our souls to another dimension. Whatever happens in our lives, God is greater. God is greater, with grace and mercy.

This past summer, one of my journeys took me to the great country of Ghana. I was on a pilgrimage there, and I glimpsed the faithful witness of many Christian brothers and sisters there. Our church, our community of faith, is wide and broad and wonderful! You will hear me talk more about that trip.

But, today, briefly, I want to mention one of the hard elements of that trip. We visited two of the treacherous slave castles of Ghana, cells and dungeons where slaves were kept in dreadful conditions, as they awaited passage across the ocean to a lifetime of slavery. The experience, for us pilgrims, was painful. We were embarrassed and guilty and horrified at what we saw, reminders of the evils of the slave trade.

But our being there was important, because we were giving witness. In order to be faithful witnesses in life, each of us, every one of us, must be honest about both the good and the bad. It is my prayer that our witness of the slave trade evil, will prevent us from falling into such sin again.

It is the same with our church, and with our lives, today. We are called to be witnesses, a great cloud of witnesses. We are meant to notice, to give witness to, the realities of the world, even when they are not so good, so that we can also shine the light of God's grace on those matters.

Friends, the place where we do that is here, the Christian Church. Here is where we bring the needs and realities of the world to the light of God's grace. When grace touches the world, glory results.

The Cathedral of St. Philip has a theme for this Fall, and for this year. We will use it in our Christian education programs. We will use it in our stewardship programs as we seek support for ministry. This year our theme is the simple phrase, "Glory in the Church." The phrase comes from Ephesians 3:21, "to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations."

What we mean to say is that there is glory in the church! The church is not simply another tired old institution in the world today, slow and outmoded, oblivious maybe. No, glory occurs here. People of all sorts and conditions gather here, we bring all manner of confusion and need, and then, somehow, God touches us here. God touches us through each other, and God touches us with a transcendence that we sometimes cannot describe. That touch is grace. That grace and glory are why church exists.

Glory in the Church! We also mean, by that, an exhortation. Take pride, speak forth, glorify the church! Speak well of it! (Bring children to be baptized in the Church!) There is no other corporation or establishment or group or institution that aspires to what we aspire to. Our goal is to be the Body of Christ in a world that needs grace and mercy. Glory in the Church so that God's work is done.

Oh, it is a sweet morning this morning. I look out at this congregation, and I see faces of faith. I glory in the Church. I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

You are surrounded, too. Look around you. Touch someone today. Let them touch you.

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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