

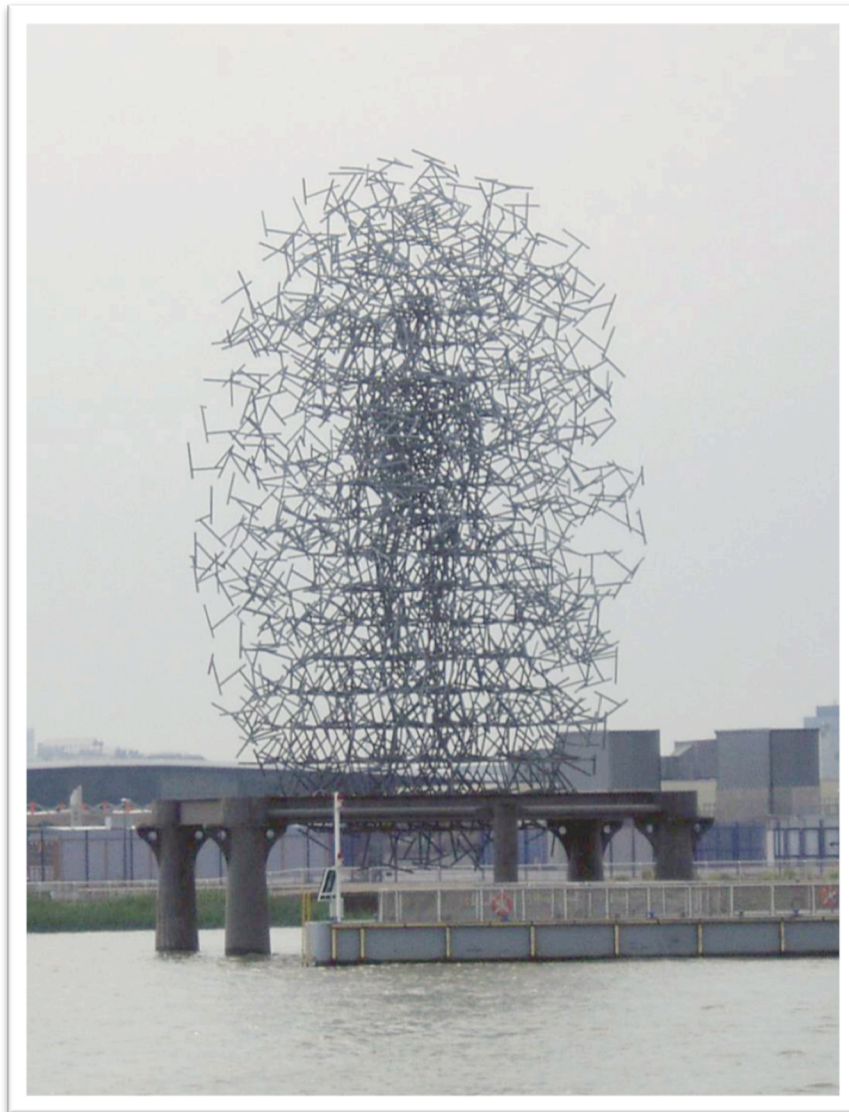
13TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

AUGUST 18, 2013

JUST A CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Pastor Jim Dunn

(The quote and some inspiration come from a devotion based on the picture and written by Ben Ahlersmeyer and accessed through visualfeast.csl.edu)



Hebrews 11; 12:1-3

By Faith

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

2 For by it the people of old received their commendation. **3** By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. **5** By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. **6** And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. **7** By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. **9** By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. **10** For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. **11** By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. **12** Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. **14** For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. **15** If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. **16** But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, **18** of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." **19** He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. **20** By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. **21** By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. **22** By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. **24** By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, **25** choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. **26** He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. **27** By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. **28** By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

29 By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. **30** By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. **31** By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— **33** who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, **34** quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. **35** Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. **36** Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. **37** They were stoned, they were sawn in two, **[a]** they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— **38** of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, **40** since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Jesus, Founder and Perfecter of Our Faith

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Do Not Grow Weary

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

Please, take a look at the picture on the back of today's service folder. You can see water in the foreground. You can see a pier. And on top of the pier you can see what may be the oddest crane for loading ships that you've ever seen. Yes, it's made out of steel, like a crane. It is made of fifty metric tons of galvanized steel. It's tall like a crane. It stands about 10 stories high. But that's sort of where the resemblance ends. Maybe, it looks to you more like a gigantic Christmas tree. Or, maybe it looks like a tangle of old television antennas. So, I don't know how much it helps to say that what's on top of the pier is a sculpture. Located in London, England, this giant sculpture was designed by Antony Gormley. But ever since he completed it in 1999, viewers have wondered what the sculpture is. When they learn that Gormley calls it *Quantum Cloud*, their eye is drawn to the outer shape of the sculpture to see whether it really looks like a cloud.

Our eye is drawn also to another odd cloud. It's called the great cloud of witnesses. The writer of Hebrews tells us that as we run the race of faith we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). Now, is this odd cloud really a cloud? What is it really?

Well, for something described 20 centuries ago, this cloud is far more recognizable than Gormley's *Quantum Cloud*. We can picture running a race surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses. We can picture running a race on an oval track inside a huge stadium surrounded by a huge crowd of spectators, a great cloud of witnesses. Now, who are these witnesses, and what are they witnessing?

In the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, the writer lists a number of these witnesses: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Moses' father and mother, the people of Israel, Rahab, Gideon, and David. All of them are described as people of faith. But this is not the entire cloud of witnesses. Our eye is drawn to all kinds of people of faith whom we admire: an author of a book we read or a guest speaker we once heard, or the great people of faith listed here in Hebrews 11, or our eye is drawn to people of faith we've known personally whom we've admired, as well as teachers and pastors whose work we have admired, as well as congregations we have admired, including this congregation as it was in the 1950's. Our eye is drawn to them. We can't help but wish we could be like them.

And when we're not like them, we can get discouraged. We can become weary in our race of faith. We can become fainthearted about following where Jesus is leading us. Our eye is drawn today to Milo and Milda, as we rejoice with them for 70 years of marriage. But we can't help but wish we could be like them. And when we can't, that can be discouraging. That can make us weary. Our eye is naturally drawn to those whose faith we have admired, whose work and success we have envied. We wish we could be like them. And when we're not, we can get discouraged. We can become weary. We can get distracted from going where Jesus is leading us. Our eye is drawn to the great cloud of witnesses. We wish we had the faith of Abraham, the patience of Moses, the aggressive audacity of Rahab.

But you see this *Quantum Cloud* sculpture. Our eye is naturally drawn to look at its outer shape to see whether it looks like a cloud or more like a tree. But this sculpture is not about the cloud. It's about what's at the center of the cloud. Look again at the picture. Do you see that at the center of the cloud it's darker? Now trace the shape of that dark center. It looks like the faint image of a person.

That's not your imagination. It is there by the designer's intent. The designer Antony Gormley created a human form in the middle of the cloud. He used his own likeness to create the human form in the middle of the cloud. So that as people walk by this *Quantum Cloud*, the creator of this cloud may be revealed.

Now, think about this with me. How is the great cloud of witnesses just like that? Our eye is naturally drawn to it. We can't help but look at the faith and the success of others and wish we could have the same. But the great cloud of witnesses is not about them. "The great cloud of witnesses is not about how great they were or what they accomplished. The great cloud of witnesses is about what's at the center of that cloud." (Ahlersmeyer) It's about God who created that cloud of witnesses. It's about God's Son, who was sent in human likeness to redeem that cloud of witnesses. It's about the Holy Spirit, who gave those witnesses faith and enabled them to live out the faith. The great cloud of witnesses is about God's faithfulness in the lives of a great many people. Why are they called witnesses? They are called witnesses because of their faith, their work and their accomplishments all witness to the faithfulness of God.

So, the great cloud of witnesses helps paint a picture of God.

We are shown Abraham. He is an ordinary man who was told to leave Haran, his nation, his culture, and his family and go to an undisclosed location. He had no plan, no map, no destination, and no route recon. But he went, and Sarah went with him to wherever God was taking them.

We are shown Moses, another ordinary man, who led his people out of slavery in Egypt to go to the land to which God was leading them.

We are shown the army of Israel, ordinary people who marched 7 times around the heavily fortified city of Jericho, because God told them that was the battle plan.

Through this long list of ordinary men and women, we get a picture of something far greater. We get a picture of a faithful God who never gave up on the nation that He created, but enabled ordinary people to do extraordinary acts of faith, whereby that tiny nation, nearly annihilated a number of times, survived to give birth to the Savior of all nations.

That's the God who remains faithful to us, even when our eye is drawn to the wrong thing. Even when our eye is drawn to people of faith instead of to the God who gave them that faith; even when our eye is drawn to what they accomplished instead of to the One who blessed them with such accomplishment, God still remains faithful to us. Even when we're discouraged and weary and fainthearted about going where He is leading us, He remains faithful to us. Faithfully, He provides again today that great cloud of witnesses to paint for us a picture of God, to point us to the center, to the man at the center: God's Son, Jesus Christ, who though joy was set before Him, though joy was dangled in front of Him by the devil, instead Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, securing forgiveness for our sins. Faithfully, God uses the great cloud of witnesses to draw our eye to Jesus.

It's through Jesus that we see that we non-Jews are also part of that great cloud of witnesses. Through, Jesus, we have a place in the cloud. We are part of the great cloud of witnesses that helps others see Christ. Our lives, our continued faith, our accomplishments would testify not to our greatness but to the faithfulness of God, that He would use us ordinary men and women to do extraordinary acts of faith, of following wherever Jesus leads us. Jesus - who is our center!

Amen