

Isn't it funny how the English language changes?

Once upon a time I used to be *cool* with things. Now, people are *down* with things. At one point in history, saying something was 'terrible' meant it was 'terrific'.

Don't get me started with 'gay.'

When I read through our Preacher Friend's sermon to the Hebrews, that line about 'a cloud of witnesses' stuck in my head.

Cloud. There are many new ways to think about that word today. Joni Mitchell may have recalled clouds to be rows and rows of angel hair and ice cream castles in the air, but I doubt she ever thought of them in terms of digital storage.

"I've backed up my data on the cloud."

Today, clouds not only rain and snow on everyone, they also hold in ether-ial space every word, picture, and embarrassing tweet we've ever keyed into the internet.

I really don't know how those clouds work. At all.

When theologians and scripture geeks write about the Great Cloud of Witnesses, it's usually about the saints. In fact, the Episcopal Church has just updated it's tome of saintly dates and biographies and titled it just that: Great Cloud of Witnesses.

I suppose that the metaphor is meant to remember these folks from days gone by with reverence and imagine them sitting on puffy sofas high up in the sky. Such a far cry from Thornton Wilder's hard chair cemetery of souls in Our Town.

August is a month full of reminders of the witnesses who make up the community of saints.

The Preacher to the Hebrews remembers Rahab, the prostitute, and Gideon and Sampson, the judges. In addition to remembering the Virgin Mary, whose day was this past Thursday, we also remember

- Jonathon Myrick Daniels, a seminarian who stepped in front of a bullet to save a young African-American girl;
- Joseph of Arimathea, who gave Jesus his burial place;
- Clare of Assisi, the companion of animal-loving Francis;
- And Lawrence of Rome, the deacon who defied the authorities by declaring that the poor people of the city were its treasures. The relic of the gridiron he was roasted upon can be found in the church in Rome named after him. He is my favorite deacon saint and I honor him each year by eating barbeque on August 10th. Well done, Lawrence, well done.

If we only remember the historical saints, it feels as if the ghostly community is static, simply watching us go about our daily tasks, not caring about us. But, that's only one way to look at this cloud. The other is to experience them.

No. I'm not imaging things. And, it's not just me. Over the past 29 years of ordained ministry, I've heard story after story from people who have experienced being in the midst of the community of saints.

One story, from a friend in Columbus, described how during an Easter service, he could feel the presence of the people who had once graced the pews of 150-year-old St. Paul's. I've been told that here, people still remember where they would encounter memories of the folks who now rest in the columbarium. The memories were palpable.

It's not only a church thing. When the Cubs won the World Series in 2016, after a 108-year drought, my first thought wasn't "Hooray, they did it." It was to call on my father and my grandfather to come and share the moment with me. And fans across the country called on Harry Carey and Ernie Banks and Ron Santo. We wanted to celebrate together.

At this table, we still do.

However, I'm concerned with what the saints are witnessing now:

- Rampant greed and corruption threatening life on this planet for everyone.
- The pitting of science and faith against each other, when they should be informing each other.
- Institutions established to help those in need mistrusted because of the actions of their leaders.

How will we gather the courage to risk upsetting the powers and principalities in order that we can overcome climate change, racial unrest, hunger, and disease if we don't cling to the stories of others who have done the same. Where would we be without Episcopalians like Frances Perkins, who envisioned and worked to make possible the Social Security Administration? Or, William Stringfellow, who eschewed a monetarily successful law career in order to represent the poorest of the poor in New York City, becoming an early civil rights advocate.

As our ancestors in the faith look at us from those cloudy cushions, do they shake their heads and say 'We've changed'? Is everything lost, and nothing gained, in living every day?

“Of course not!” they say. It is because of these witnesses that we take step after step. It is because of Jesus, who died and rose for us and who knows our pain and grieves and suffers with us, that we are given faith to go on. Their stories give us courage and inspiration. And, sometimes, just enough humor to make life a little easier to take.

Thank God for the cloud of witnesses. Because of them, and their presence ever with us, we can be confident that this present time is not the only time.

Because of them, we never have to take the next step in life alone.

Both Sides Now

Joni Mitchell

Rows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere
I've looked at clouds that way

But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud's illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all

Moons and Junes and ferries wheels
The dizzy dancing way you feel
As every fairy tale comes real
I've looked at love that way

But now it's just another show
You leave 'em laughing when you go
And if you care, don't let them know
Don't give yourself away

I've looked at love from both sides now
From give and take and still somehow
It's love's illusions I recall
I really don't know love at all

Tears and fears and feeling proud,
To say "I love you" right out loud
Dreams and schemes and circus crowds
I've looked at life that way

But now old friends they're acting strange
They shake their heads, they say I've changed
Well something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day.

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all

I've looked at life from both sides now
From up and down, and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all