

June 27, 2010
Surrounded

Text: Hebrews 12:1-2

First Christian Church, Pasadena, Texas

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill, pastor of Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

One of my preaching heroes, and a spiritual giant of the first rank, has said that the ultimate work of God's grace is to make us gracious. More and more, I am finding that axiom to be an irrefutable truth.

This morning I come to you as one who is grateful nearly beyond the power of language to convey. I say "nearly" because I must try, in some small way, to tell you my thanks. In the place that witnessed my stumbling maturation through the wild ways of adolescence toward young adulthood, I am quick to say thanks.

Thanks to Rev. Dave Everton for his gracious invitation to come and preach here, on the heels of the occasion of the Sam Rayburn High School Choir Reunion which was held just this past Friday night.

Thanks to David Snyder for initiating the idea of this guest pulpit moment even being possible and for his warm hospitality.

Thanks to Dale and Carol Adams for their generous hospitality.

And I am grateful, abidingly grateful to this congregation, far more than you can ever imagine.

It has been 10 years since I most recently traipsed through here one hot August day. It has been nearly 20 years since I was present in Pasadena for a hilarious 20th high school reunion. And it has been nearly 40 years since I last worshiped with this family of faith. On this Fathers Day in the year 2010, it gives me great satisfaction to say thanks to you – all of you, fathers and mothers, men and women – for lovingly "fathering" me when I was in my high school years. By your caring actions, I have incurred a debt I can never repay. My only option

is to live my life and share my faith so that others may also know God's great love through the salvific ways of Jesus Christ. This is a momentous occasion for me, and I thank you for it.

I am currently on sabbatical for three months – away from my duties at Community Christian Church in Kansas City, Missouri. After the May 2nd celebration of my 25th anniversary at the corner of 46th and Main in Kansas City, I was granted time to get away and refresh and enjoy and revel in some research. As I have traversed more than 3,172 miles across 12 states in my trusty Jeep, I have been anticipating this moment with great eagerness.

Now, given the miles traveled and the distance away from Kansas City, you would think I would have a lot of time in solitude, in a kind of sacred, spiritual singularity. Alone. But you would be amiss in that assumption. Quite the opposite has occurred. Instead of singularity and solitude, I have been ... surrounded.

On the way to this appointed moment, I have been surrounded by the sounds of Alison Krauss and Union Station and Rascal Flats and Willis Alan Ramsey and Willie Nelson, as my Jeep became a musical cocoon.

I have been surrounded by the visual feast of the countrysides and cityscapes of the South and the Southwest in all of their verdant beauty.

I have been surrounded by the sound of my wife Priscilla's voice on my cell phone as she gave updates on our cat Cleo, her continuous battles with the rabbits tormenting her tomato patch, and the height of the grass which will require the immediate attention of my lawnmower when I return home next Tuesday.

I have been surrounded by memories of this church and the diligence and devotion of Sunday School teachers like Jack and Maureen Sullivan and youth group sponsors like the Praytors, the Millers, the Duffs, and more. And I shall remain eternal grateful for the great graces of Roy and Annetta Daniel – Annetta

for her comforting ways and Roy for his encouragement of so many of us in our faith journeys whether as clergy or lay persons but always as Christians making a difference in the world. I continuously feel surrounded by memories of Roy Daniel whose official retirement from the ministry, by the way, was held at Community in Kansas City. As I drove by the old First Christian building on Wafer the other day, I recalled two lessons Roy taught me. (1) work for what you want to achieve, which he made real to me, for instance, when he scrubbed the floors of the sanctuary to earn a scholarship to attend the International Affairs Seminar in Washington, D.C. and New York. (2) It is always easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission. Roy lived out that proposition to the utmost degree!

So, as you can see, I have been surrounded. But, let me be quick to say, no more surrounded than *you* have been, than you *are*, than *we all are* if we are awake and aware and alive in our Christian journeys.

The book of Hebrews gives us this insight in a peculiar and powerful way in one of its most memorable passages.

Hebrews is actually a book of sermons, bedazzling in its beauty, rich in its metaphors. A preacher could easily preach three months of sermons on nearly any of its chapters. Its plentitude of themes and its high and soaring poetry are the stuff of which heartfelt, passionate sermons are made.

In the extraordinarily fertile 12th chapter and its gems of wisdom and meaning, we read, *“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 perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer 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....”*

The analogy is to the kind of foot races that predominated in the time of the early church. Throughout the Roman Empire there were races in arenas, in towns and villages, in public areas. The readers of and listeners to the epistle to the Hebrews would know such a reference and would be energetically connected to the scene: "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..."

First, you have to put off anything weighing you down.

And then there's the goal: "...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."

Telescope with me just a bit further and consider the opening phrase, which contains another metaphor referring to the race: "... so great a cloud of witnesses..." Here is a cloud of witnesses.... a cheering throng encouraging you on, a huge posse of prompters and prodders, people serving as witnesses of your life and your efforts in the race of faith.

But look with me once more in telescopic fashion and consider the importance of one little word that commences the passage.

The runner is there, shedding everything that would keep the runner from running toward victory. In this case, it's not merely heavy sandals or a fifteen pound tunic. Rather it's the weighty matter of sin and sin's dragging effects.

And the crowd is there. In fact it's a "cloud of witnesses." Now, behold the size and the situation of the witnesses as the dynamics of the crowd and the race and the runner are captured in one little word: "... *surrounded*..."

Surrounded. Surrounded. Such a strong word. And such a right word to be associated with those who would witness one's efforts in life and faith. But what does it mean?

I. Surrounded by a Moral Gaze

Could it mean that the runner of the race of faith is to be mindful of the moral gaze of those who have gone before?

In our family my mother had a guilt-producing, heart-chastening phrase she employed in order to discipline us, or, more accurately, me. When I would do something off-center from proper behavior, she'd say "The Hills don't do that sort of thing!" And she normally said it with an arched eyebrow to emphasize the point.

"The Hills." Meaning? Meaning... we were surrounded by the righteous eyes of our family who would never do (or get caught doing) what I had been doing. Surrounded. Have you ever been surrounded like that? And is this what the writer to the Hebrews meant and means, to know that countless righteousness-seeking eyes were gazing upon the runner?

II. Existentially Encompassed

Or could it be that the Hebrews writer meant to convey how the King James Version has the translation, existentially "encompassed"? On all sides, at every turn, a colossal stadium of folks watching your every move, ready to cheer you to victory and nothing less. That's a bit intimidating when you think of it.

I have a friend who hates Easter. "They're all there, all of them!" he says, in a kind of incensed fury that reminds you of Lewis Blackath his most perturbed. "I resent it," he says. He says, "They show up for just one Sunday a year, and expect me to like it that they're there!" "Yes," I responded. "They're there! That's the point, don't you think? Can't you rejoice in that?" I asked him. "I suppose, but they're all looking at me for something, and it's a lot of pressure. I mean this may be my only shot," he said. It took me a while to really empathize with him, since I love Easter more than almost any other day on the Christian calendar. And I treasure when everyone shows up. It's like a royal family reunion of those seeking a word about hope and goodness. And I really thought he had it wrong. It wasn't and it never is about him or me, or any other preacher or church leader. No one can really mess up Easter. The gospel has a power of its own. Love –

divine, eternal love, made manifest in our oh-so-human lives – conquers death, and that’s what we are to celebrate on resurrection morning.

But my friend feels “encompassed,” “encircled,” “penned in,” “on display” on Easter Sunday and certainly under pressure. His sense of being “surrounded” is a debilitating, throttling, choking kind of experience. Under pressure. The kind of pressure you would feel if a dark cloud of eyes were looking at you for a superior performance.

III. Physically Fenced In

Or the word “surrounded” could mean “fenced in,” “besieged,” “blockaded,” surrounded in such a way that you can do nothing but what the crowd wants you to do. No volition. No alternatives. “Caught,” in other words, able to do nothing else but a task that has been arbitrarily set to your hands.

Last October, Priscilla and I celebrated our 20th anniversary by enjoying the low country beauty and bounty of Savannah, Georgia. And yes, we did make it to “The Lady and Son’s” for dinner one evening. This is the now famous restaurant of Paula Dean, whose thick Georgia accent and foot-high lemon meringue pies have become legendary. She’s more than merely the Martha-Stewart-south-of-the-Mason-Dixon-line. She’s a veritable industry unto herself. What most folks don’t know – unless they’re among the legions of her devoted cookbook readers (and I’m not and thus didn’t know) – is that for most of her life Paula Dean has suffered from agoraphobia. She has battled a stifling fear of open places. Like they used to say in Koine Greek during the early days of the Church, she has a fear of the *agora*, the open place, usually the market place, where, – you guessed it!– “a cloud of witnesses” seemingly watch your every move. Paula Dean would not resonate positively with that word, “Surrounded.” And she has countless friends who know exactly how she feels.

*IV. A New Definition:
Lovingly and Proudly Embraced*

In the face of all these less-than-positive perspectives on the phrase, “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” allow me to offer what I think is the foundational meaning behind the word “surrounded” in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews: *proudly, lovingly embraced*.

It goes like this, *“Therefore, since we are proudly, lovingly embraced, by such a throng of folks who care for us, let us run the faith race....”*

Carlyle Marney emphasized this angle when he described “the cloud of witnesses” as a balcony full of family members and friends, who look down from their balcony perch at the performance of your life upon earth’s stage, ready for your every utterance in the grand drama of life, ever eager to cheer you on with *“Bravo!”* and *“Encore!”*

I now have a new image to remind me of the loving, proud embrace of those who witness the life we share in the Christian faith race.

In the middle of Savannah, in Savannah’s historic district, on the eastern edge of Monterrey Square, laid out by James Ogelthorpe in 1733, there sits the current sanctuary of Temple Mickve Israel. Founded as a congregation 277 years ago, with a building that dates back to 1878, the people of Mickve Israel have instituted a special remembrance feature on the walls of their hallowed place of worship. Large brass memorial plaques adorn the walls of the sanctuary and the plaques are inscribed with the names of the members who have died in the course of the history of the congregation. Seemingly innumerable names, countless plaques, treasured names. Like Reform Jewish congregations all over the U.S. and throughout the world, during the Kaddish portion of their weekly Shabbat services, the names of those who died in years past during that particular week are spoken aloud. And not only that, at Mickve Israel, they are symbolized on their plaques.

When I went into the Mickve Israel sanctuary to pray, I noticed that certain little lights were lit up on the plaques. Each wall of plaques had a few lights lit up on them. I looked closer and saw there was a small, discreet light by each name. A few lit up and then many dark. And then the awareness hit me, which I confirmed later with the receptionist at the temple door. The lights were turned on for those who had died during that particular week in years past. The next week, different names would be lit up, and the week after that still other different names. In the course of a year, every name of every deceased member of Mickve Israel would be spoken and every light would blink on.

And I, what did I think? It was so very natural, so easy, in the middle of the Mickve Israel sanctuary, to think of a treasured verse of scripture: *"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."*

Surrounded by the illuminating blessings of precious memories.

Surrounded by the witness to life and light and grace and care and untold faithful efforts.

Surrounded by the loving embrace, the embracing love of those who have gone before.

Surrounded by those who called us into faith, those who made it possible – teachers, vacation Bible school leaders, youth group sponsors – those who provided examples for living and encouragement for growth.

Surrounded by pastors and ministers and church members who invited us into a heart-felt, mind-stretching, soul-deepening journey.

I felt what surely the members of Mickve Israel have felt for 277 years: Surrounded! Proudly, lovingly embraced!

Now you may not have such plaques here in the sanctuary, but you do have illuminations that can remind you that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. You have windows in this building through which the light of the waiting world shines through. I want to suggest to you this morning that the

windows and the light shining through the windows of this building, each and every time you gather here, represent the great cloud of witnesses who are proudly, lovingly embracing you in the grand race of faith. In other words you are always , and especially *here*, surrounded!

Surrounded by the encouraging gazes of former Sunday School teachers and Youth Group leaders and parents and pastors.

Surrounded by the wider reaches of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Surrounded by the great array of great souls who have gone before all of us: Albert Schweitzer and Flannery O'Connor and Bill Wilson, the founder of A.A., and Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat of Humanity, and Madeleine L'Engle and Cesar Chavez and Rosa Parks and Gardner C. Taylor and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa and so many more. All of these, and myriad other saints, surround us with their lovingly proud embraces.

This magisterium of the ages includes the beholding, witnessing encouragement of every person who has followed after the carpenter from Nazareth, the rabbi known as the Master Teacher, the one whom they and we have proclaimed (and will continue to proclaim) as "the light of the world."

So whenever you come into this place, I invite you to say a word. Say it with a deep gratitude for the proud, loving embrace in which you have been enfolded. Whenever you come to this table, whenever you dedicate a baby, whenever you lay to rest one of First Christian's saints, whenever you witness a couple pledging their troth to one another in a wedding ceremony, say it. Say it as prayer, as thanksgiving, as praise, as exaltation: "Surrounded.... Surrounded.... Surrounded...."

When I return to Kansas City after this portion of the sabbatical, there will surely be some inquiries about my itinerary, where I've been, what I've seen, how I've experienced this time away. When folks ask "How was it, what was it

like?" I already have in my mind how I will respond. I will simply say, "It was beautiful, almost more than I ever imagined or hoped for. I suppose the best word I can use to describe what it was like is ... *surrounded.*" AMEN.