

- **Joseph**, who by faith gave instructions that his bones should one day be carried out of Egypt and buried in the Promised Land.
- **Moses’ parents**, who by faith hid Moses from the edict of Pharaoh and did not leave him to die.
- **Moses** who, though adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter, by faith refused to be known as her son, and “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God”. By faith he kept the first Passover.
- **The People of Israel** who by faith passed through the Red Sea.
- **Rahab**, who by faith welcomed God’s spies, saving her family from the fall of Jericho.

Also “*Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword...*”(Heb. 11:32-33)

In other words, the great cloud of witnesses are all those people who have lived lives of faith before us, following God, worshipping Jesus, and leaving for us a rich spiritual legacy. Thinking about their lives, how they lived, what they lived for, and how they died inspires us. Their example shows us how to live lives of faith.

Many Christian traditions give the title “saint” to people who have lived great lives of faith. The word “saint” comes from the Greek word *hagios*, which means “consecrated to God, holy, sacred, pious.” It is almost always used in the plural, “saints.” The idea of the word “saints” is a group of people set apart for God and God’s kingdom. So, scripturally speaking, the “saints” are the body of Christ, Christians, the church. All Christians are saints and at the same time are called to be saints. Christians are saints by virtue of their connection with Jesus Christ; and Christians are called to be saints, to increasingly allow their daily life to become more Christ-like.

As Hebrews 12 asserts, these “saints” help us to run our race each day. Athletes in a race are surrounded by rows and rows of spectators, pictured for us here as “a great cloud of witnesses.” Their unyielding faith bears witness to the promises of Jesus Christ, urging us to follow their example and “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” especially in the midst of trials and persecution (12:1). Their testimony lives on in us.`

The “race,” then, is the Christian life. It’s a marathon, not a sprint, and we are called to stay the course and remain faithful to the end. Paul used this same imagery near the end of his life: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith* (2 Timothy 4:7). The steadfastness of these “saints” speaks to believers today of the rewards of staying in the race, of never giving up. The race set before us requires faith, stamina, commitment, and discipline in order to live faithfully.

The race is “set before us,” meaning that we did not select the course, but it is God who established it. This race we run for Christ. We stay the course in spite of trials and persecutions (Hebrews 12:4–11). As we run, we must “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). Because Jesus perfectly finished His race, Jesus should be the focus of our lives. We look away from all distractions because Jesus is already at the finish line.

The race demands that we do away with “everything that hinders” — sin or whatever it is that threatens our relationship with God. Anything that will slow us down or trip us up must be cast off. The apostle Paul says *to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness* (Ephesians 4:22–24). With the encouragement of the “saints” who have gone on before, we rid ourselves of thoughts, attitudes, and habits that impede our progress.

Seeing that the race God set out for us is a lifelong marathon, we must commit ourselves to run to the very end. A daily regimen of prayer, worship, reading God’s Word and examining our lives for impediments will help. We will persevere by maintaining a Christ-like attitude even in the midst of trials. No matter how long the race may be, we keep our eyes on Jesus, “the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.”

When I think of My-Cloud, I am reminded of the faithful men and women who influenced my walk with God; of the teachers and preachers who encouraged and empowered me to heed my call to ministry; of the “saints” in my own life – the living and the departed – who continue to guide me in the faith.

- **Karen** who daily, and in every way, supports me in my ministry.
- **My Parents** who raised me to love the Lord and serve God’s People.

- **Marilyn Cramsie** who patiently taught a precocious 1<sup>st</sup> grader the Bible stories.
- **Don Johnson** who nurtured my love of music.
- **Charles Bartow** who trained me to preach God’s Word to God’s People.
- **Forbes Walker** who walked me through my first church internship.
- **Roberto Santizo** who laid hands on me and prayed for God’s Spirit to fill me.
- **Don Juel**, a professor who helped unlock the secrets of the Gospels for me.

My-Cloud changes as new needs present themselves and as new situations arise that need new skills. One of the most amazing things about My-Cloud is that it never diminishes: I just keep adding saints to My-Cloud. Now My-Cloud includes all of you. I have learned so much from working with this faith family. Your faith and trust in me, your love and support, your advice and wisdom have molded me, stretched me, developed me, and inspired me to become the person God created me to be. I would not be who I am without you. I could not move forward in this ministry without you. I should never forget to be thankful for you, My-Cloud of Witnesses.

Today we gather at Christ’s Table, to remember that in Jesus Christ we are gathered together as a Cloud of Witnesses. But there are three empty places at the table this year: Esther Esser, John Hatling, and Barb Johnson are gone from our midst, but not from our lives: their influence and their impact guides us still as part of our Cloud of Witnesses. Esther taught me about gracious hospitality and she modeled a gentle spirit that could move mountains. John taught me that there is a song for every occasion, and always a reason to sing God’s praises. Barb inspired me to laugh through the pain and to enjoy each moment as a gift from God.

In Jesus Christ we are able to join the faithful of ages past with the saints of today. The Great Cloud of Witnesses surrounds us and encourages us to act as if they were in sight and cheering us on to the same victory in the life of faith that they obtained. We, who would be faithful disciples, must learn from the men and women of faith who preceded us. By drawing inspiration from them, we can live lives of great faith, and in turn become part of the Great Cloud of Witnesses to others.

## My Cloud

**All Saints’ Sunday, November 2, 2014**  
**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

***Hebrews 12:1-2*** and ***Proverbs 11:14; 12:15; 15:22; 19:20-21***

I have a smartphone. My smartphone has a dumb user. I can make calls, text, use the GPS feature, play Angry Birds, and take a picture; which amounts to about 10% of what my smartphone can do. Of the other 90% of its features, I am utterly clueless.

One of those unused features is the i-Cloud. As I understand it, the i-Cloud is a storage site somewhere in the ethereal mists, from which I can access documents, photos and music with any computer or smartphone. Now you know everything I know about the i-Cloud.

This week, as I considered the question, “Who has influenced your ministry?” I thought of the Cloud; not the i-Cloud, but the Cloud of Witnesses referenced by the writer of Hebrews. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith* (vv. 1-2).

So, to whom does the “great cloud of witnesses” refer? In the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, the writer names some people of faith:

- **Abel**, who offered a better sacrifice by faith and was commended as righteous.
- **Enoch**, who by his faith pleased God, so he never experienced death.
- **Noah**, who by faith obeyed God’s command and turned his back on a world of evil.
- **Abraham**, who obeyed God and went where God told him to go, without knowing where this would be. He made his home in the Promised Land even though he was a stranger there. From him came “descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky”.
- **Isaac**, Abraham’s promised child, who by faith blessed Jacob and Esau.
- **Jacob**, who by faith blessed Joseph’s sons.