

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 with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.
(Hebrews 12:1-3)

How many of you have ever stood in this pulpit? Now I know a few of you have preached here, so you know how it feels to be up here. But I encourage the rest of you to try it out sometime, when no one else is here.

I did that. I came and stood up here shortly before I preached for the very first time. And although this particular pulpit is not nearly as high as those in some old Puritan churches, which are a good six or seven steps above the sanctuary floor, it is daunting.

Because from up here, every one of you can see me and I can see every one of you. Not to mention that when you're short like me, we have to place an additional step in here, which means I am always afraid of falling off.

This pulpit is also daunting because you all expect something of the person who stands here during worship. You expect to hear a message about God, who God is, how God acts in the world, and what God thinks of us, along with what our response to God needs to be.

It's the responsibility of the person preaching in the pulpit to make God's Word relevant for our lives today. So in the Protestant tradition and Protestant churches, the pulpit is considered the most important piece of furniture. That's why it is the highest, and in some cases the most central piece of furniture in the sanctuary.

So for those who do it, preaching is serious business. And can be a daunting work.

The very first time I preached, formally that is, was right here on August 15, 2010. I'm sure some of you remember that. At least I hope you do. I sure do. Pastor Bill was gone on vacation and he'd asked me to fill in.

I came here on Saturday to practice my sermon a few times and to get "comfortable" in the pulpit, as comfortable as I could get. But by Sunday morning I was nervous. Actually, I was terrified.

I arrived at church and as I was waiting in the Narthex to walk in, so many of you came up to me and wished me well. Actually, you did more than wish me well, you said that you knew I would do well. One of you smiled and asked if I had brought my "A game." Many of you took my hand in your and gave me smiles, winks and assurances.

And right before I walked down the aisle at the beginning of worship, someone came up to me and asked if I was nervous. "Not really," I replied, "I'm with people who know me and want me to succeed; they want me to do well." I added that I couldn't imagine a better place to preach for the very first time than in my church home. Your assurances had calmed my nerves.

Then I stepped up into this pulpit and the terror returned. But something else happened too.

When I finally looked up and looked out, and not just at the doors in back, which is one of those public speaking tricks we're taught, but when I finally got up the nerve to actually look at all of you sitting in the pews, I saw a great cloud of witnesses just as I do today.

I recognized that at that very moment, I was surrounded by faithful people, who love, nurture, support and empower one another in life, in faith and in ministry or as the writer

of the letter to the Hebrews puts it so eloquently, who help each other persevere in the race that is set before us.

On that very first day I preached, your assurances calmed me because you were my great cloud of witnesses; because over time you had helped me discern my call to preaching as part of my ministry by encouraging me to figure out what God was calling me to do.

Now, you didn't do this by using those exact words. You didn't come up to me and say, "Christine, I'm going to help you discern your call to ministry." No, instead you recognized my gifts and skills as you got to know me through the years and you encouraged and empowered me to use them to serve others now and in the future.

So a little over nine years ago I began serving on the mission outreach committee after one of you suggested that it might be a good fit for my interests. And shortly after that, I started lead coordinating when we served at The Gathering because at the time another one of you said you would do it with me.

Then, that same person encouraged me to make the announcements asking for volunteers for The Gathering on Sunday mornings. And although I had severe performance anxiety, which I know is hard to believe right at this moment, but I will share with you that I once hyperventilated while playing my clarinet during a solo/ensemble contest in high school, I did it. I started making the announcements and much to my surprise I started getting comfortable doing it.

As time went on and you got to know me better, some of you began to ask me if I'd thought about going into ordained ministry. In fact, all three pastors who have served

here in the time I have been here asked me to consider if perhaps I was being called by God to ordained ministry. For a very long time I dismissed what they said.

Yet it was your suggestions, prodding, support, encouragement, guidance, love and nurturing, that helped me discern my call to ministry. You helped awaken in me the call I felt years ago but dismissed because I was a member of a denomination that believed that God does not call women to ordained ministry. So because of all of you, I was and still am surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that I am able to run with perseverance this race that has been set before me.

But it's not just me who is surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses and it's not only me who is called to ministry. It's each and every one of you.

God calls each of us to ministry because ministry is much more than preaching on Sundays. Ministry is much more than anything I learn in seminary. Ministry is the way in which each of us lives our faith in the world every day. Ministry happens or has the potential to happen in every moment, in every interaction.

So each of us has certain gifts and skills given to us by God specifically for ministry. And each of us is surrounded by so great a cloud of witness to help us recognize and discern our gifts for ministry, to guide, encourage and empower us to use them and to support us when we do.

Look around right now. Look at those sitting near you. Take a look at the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds you in this sanctuary and think for a moment about how they empower you to live your faith.

Now, bear in mind that our great cloud of witnesses extends well beyond these walls. As we are reminded today, on World Communion Sunday, our great cloud of witnesses includes all people of faith all over the world, children and adults. We are one body, sharing and celebrating one meal at one table everywhere, regardless of the time.

Today and every day we are part of a great cloud of over 2 billion living witnesses worldwide.

And that's not all.

In the chapter leading up to today's reading in Hebrews, the writer lists many faithful people beginning with Abel and including those he calls "heroes of the faith," Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. He also writes about many unnamed men and women, some who even suffered and died because of their faith. All of these people are part of the great cloud of witnesses that constantly surrounds us.

Just as those to whom Hebrews is written are reminded that many people of faith preceded them, this letter reminds us that our great cloud of witnesses goes back thousands of years, well before Jesus' time. And in the time since that letter was written, hundreds of thousands if not millions more witnesses have been added, some of whose names we recognize like St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day and Billy Graham, and many whose names we will never ever know.

As people of faith, we join them and people all over the world today, as part of so great a cloud of witnesses that surrounds us and empowers each one of us to discern our call to ministry, to nurture and support one another in that ministry and to persevere in the race that has been set before us. Amen.