**Cloud of Witnesses**

**April 10, 2016**

 Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. I cannot imagine the faith of the members of First Baptist a hundred years ago. Can you imagine? The setting is March of 1916. A new pastor, Rev. R.P. Walker, had just answered the call to become the pastor of First Baptist the previous October. The church’s finances were limited to say the least and in great disarray. Matter of fact, the church had a difficult time paying the $300 that was owed to the previous pastor who had resigned in January of 1915. Yet, the condition of Rev. Walker’s acceptance of the call was to build the church sanctuary on the very site we worship today. They had gathered for worship and prayer. After what I would imagine a powerful and rousing sermon, the members of the church began to give in cash and pledges that added up to $11,000. History says that they stayed until two o’clock so I’m sure the plate was passed many times! Think about the sacrifice and the commitment the members of the church made to God and to one another. While having trouble paying a $300 debt that was owed to the previous pastor, they committed $11,000 to build a new sanctuary. I imagine they could not visualize the magnitude of this building but they were sure of what they hoped for and certain of what God was able to do through them.

 The writers of Hebrews tells us that by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain. By faith Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death. By faith Noah built an ark during a drought after being warned about things not yet seen. By faith Abraham picked up his entire clan and moved to a foreign land he did not know. By faith Abraham became the father of many even at his advanced age. By faith Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, his one and only son. By faith Moses led his people out of slavery and into the desert. By faith, the prostitute Rahab welcomed the strangers into her home. Just as the Hebrew writer says in vs. 32, I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. Then in vs. 39-40, the author reminds us that even though these were commended for their faith, God had planned something greater for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

 Then he says, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we should set aside anything that would hinder us from the race that has been set before us. We should fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith, and keep running the race of faith. Jesus is the greatest witness and he sits on the right hand of God interceding on our behalf.

 As we consider those that have gone before us in the history of this church, we see their great faith. We remember their willingness to sacrifice beyond what we can even imagine in order for many generations to hear the gospel of Jesus and experience God in worship. We remember the hardships they endured with great perseverance. They faced great financial challenges through The Great Depression but they remianed faithful to their call. The church grew in numbers through the faithfulness of God’s people. They are a great cloud of witnesses!

 Have you ever considered your personal cloud of witnesses? Who has made an impact on your life that would make your “Mount Rushmore” of faith. If we had time, I would tell you about my neighbor Mrs. Irene Lassen. I would tell you stories of how my childhood best friend Josh made an impact on my life. I would tell you stories of people like C.K. Caldwell and Jim Turner who were youth leaders that took a special interest in me. I would tell you of the times my youth minister Sandi Self opened up her home and her office to me when I needed to talk. I would tell you of Amy’s grandfather who is an example of great faith and a true prayer warrior. I would tell you of ministry mentors like Darrell Coble and Jeff Roberts. All of these people and more would be inducted into my personal Hall of Fame of faith.

Consider these two questions this morning. First, who is in your great cloud of witnesses? I am sure you can name many who has made an incredible impact on your life. Maybe it is a family member. Maybe it is someone in the church. Maybe it was a teacher or a coach. Maybe it was a neighbor. If they are still living, take a moment today to send them a note of thanks or call them and tell them of the impact they made on your life. Second, who would consider you to be in their great cloud of witnesses? Have you invested yourself in others? As you listen to this song by Mark Shultz, consider these questions. The lyrics are printed on the insert of your bulletin.

**“Cloud of Witnesses”
By: Mark Shultz**

We watched them runnin’ down the aisles,
Children's time, Sunday morning.
The preacher asked them who they loved,
They all smiled and started pointing to their mom,
Their dad, the teacher from their kindergarten class;
And each and every one had just come from

A cloud of witnesses that would see them through the years
Cheer them with a smile and pray them through the tears
A cloud of witnesses that would see them to the end,
And shower them with love that never ends
A cloud of witnesses.

They stuck together through the years,
The best of friends faith could foster so when they found out one of them had heard the news; He'd lost his father,
They ran to him and prayed and put their hands upon his head,
And slowly one by one they'd all become

A cloud of witnesses as they sent above a prayer
They took a hold of hands and circled 'round a friend
A cloud of witnesses with a faith just like a rock,
They helped him give his father back to God
As a cloud of witnesses

So when it comes the time that heaven calls
They'll come running to see the ones who've gone before,
And made the journey home to find waiting for them at the finish line, Cheering happily they will run and they will see

A could of witnesses lined up on a street of gold
As they run the final mile that leads them to a throne.
And through the cloud of witnesses
They see God upon the throne.
And as they fall into His arms, they know they're home in
A cloud of witnesses, surrounded by a could of witnesses.

We watched them runnin down the aisles
Children's time, Sunday morning