

Cloud of witnesses: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [August 10, 2010](#) issue

Soon after I was called as senior minister of First Congregational Church in Burlington, Vermont, a church member gave me a tour of the building. When we got to the formal church parlor, I paused to take in the portraits of my predecessors hanging on the walls. I was awestruck. "There they are," I said. "The cloud of witnesses." I was only 27 at the time, in many ways too young to know that I was too young to be taking on this job. But even then I knew that I would need all the help I could get to run my leg of the race.

Soon thereafter, and every Wednesday morning for nine years, I led a Bible study in that room. The group, made up largely of women in their seventies and eighties, had been meeting there each week for longer than they could remember and, for some of them, since before I was born. We used the format they had been using for years. We read the Bible passages that would be used in the next Sunday's worship; we prayed together.

At first I prepared my lessons with meticulous care, brandishing all of the historical-critical methods of scholarship that I had learned in seminary. There was so much that I wanted to communicate. The women in the class listened with what seemed to be genuine interest as I demonstrated my academic acumen. They would ask follow-up questions, which I took to be something like asking for an encore performance.

Over time, however, the focus and tenor of the class began to change. The members began gently to redirect the conversation to the ways in which the Bible passages were speaking to what was going on in their lives. They also began to bring in what was going on in the congregation and in the world and wanted to know what the Bible might say about that. When it came time for offering prayer requests, I would often learn more here about what was going on in the lives of my parishioners than I would in any other way. They were brooding lovingly over the congregation with their prayers, as well as over a young minister who was learning his way around the congregation.

The winter's first big snowstorm arrived on a Wednesday morning that year, and I couldn't get out of my driveway. Not yet accustomed to life in Vermont, I was a bit surprised when I called the church office and someone answered the phone. I said, "Quite a storm, isn't it? Obviously, we won't be having Bible study today." The person on the other end of the line replied, "Well, I'll go tell the ladies. They'll be so disappointed." Sure enough, they were all there with Bibles open, waiting dutifully for a new minister who did not know how to get out of his own driveway. They never teased me about it directly, but conversation did turn to weather conditions with suspicious frequency after that.

One day I gave the class a dissertation on the need to move beyond exclusively male language in reference to God. I thought I was introducing a radical concept to the group, but the next week one member quietly sought me out before class. She wanted to show me a book of prayers that her mother had given her some 70 years earlier. She had marked several passages that referred to God using female imagery, as Mother as well as Father. Without a hint of reprimand but more to share a sense of wonder, she said, "There really is nothing new under the sun."

Through the years I came to look forward to those classes as an opportunity to teach, but even more as a chance to learn. During one class, in response to a hurtful episode that required her to forgive, Thelma Connor said, "I have taken the whole episode, thrown it in the deepest part of the pond and put up a sign that says, 'No fishing!'" That remains one of the best descriptions of forgiveness I know. Thelma Norton, when she was about to say something critical of a fellow church member, would always stop herself by saying, "Well, I'll just say 'Amen' to that," and then move on. I often invoke that phrase myself when I am in a similar position. Marjorie Perrin said of the need to confront someone heading down a dangerous path, "When you reach my age you don't have time to waste on anything but the truth."

Beyond any specific words of advice, that group shaped me by showing me what a Christian life looks like. It is, among other things: showing up week after week in and out of season, supporting one another in difficult times, letting prayers expand the scope of our concern, having an eye trained to spot the one in need, practicing forgiveness, keeping open to whatever new thing God might be doing. Nothing dramatic, and yet remarkable.

A while back I had the opportunity to return to that church, and I found my way to the church parlor. Not much had changed, except that my portrait hangs among those of my predecessors. What I most wanted to experience was the presence of

the members of that Wednesday morning Bible study group, most of whom have since died. I wanted to express gratitude for their faithfulness—and to be cheered on for my leg of the race that, unlike theirs, is not yet complete. Sure enough, they were all present—a cloud of witnesses.