

"Homecoming"

All Saints Sunday
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

November 6, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22;
1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know, homecoming – the annual celebration when faculty and students welcome the return of the alumni with banquets and proms and football games. Bishop and Barbara Edmiston invited my Barbara and me to the Penn State homecoming game just two Saturdays ago. Sitting in the stadium, surrounded by the third largest crowd they'd ever had (more than 109,000), I was struck how like a worship service the whole thing really was: there were the appropriate times to stand; there were selected songs to sing; there were those antiphonal responses ("We are . . ." "Penn State"); and it was all accompanied with the "wave". And when the Penn State team came onto the field, the roar that went up was both thrilling and deafening, and in the center of it all was Joe Pa.

When I read the first lesson in preparation for worship this week, I was immediately reminded of the Penn State homecoming game. It's all there – a crowd of 144,000 (the faithful from the twelve tribes of Israel, but also men, women and children from every nation in numbers too great to count) and there was protocol aplenty. There's the great shout and the song and the celebration and in the center of it all, God and the Lamb.

And here we are, on All Saints Sunday, gathered in song and celebration. In actuality, in real time, mirroring the action, repeating the praise and the worship of the saints in white gathered in the kingdom of heaven, and we sang their song "This is the feast" and giving glory to God for all that He has accomplished for us in and through Jesus Christ.

For we celebrate the fact that God has gathered all the saints, the faithfully departed, all those who have ever gone before us; those whom we've never known, those of whom we've only heard, and those whom we knew and loved, who have gone ahead of us. All of them in a great crowd gathered around God and the Lamb, just as we and other congregations are gathered this morning joining them in praise and worship – what a crowd! What a gathering! What a celebration!

"But wait, Stu", I hear you say, "just hold on a minute. You're getting carried away up there. Surely not everyone who ever lived is gathered there, are they?" And the answer is, sadly, "No. Not everyone is there."

There are some who have chosen not to be present. And some who, having received the invitation, decided not to accept it, not even to participate. And that's the frightening thing about God's unconditional love for us, in that while He loves us and calls us into a living relationship with him, His love is so great that He's prepared to allow us to make alternative choices, to put other things first in our lives. To pay lip service to all that He commands. To live for ourselves, and make our own way in the world. Which means, in the end, we don't want to be any part of the celebration because of the choices we've made.

Come to think of it, it's just like the Penn State game. I'm sure there were faculty and students and alumni who weren't there in the crowd; they had other commitments to attend to, other places to be, other things to do, and there are, I guess, those who couldn't afford the ticket. And of course there's a ticket for the Kingdom of Heaven, as well. Admission to the kingdom, you know, is extraordinarily expensive; so great, in fact, that all of us combined with the greatest of our energies could never pay for it. And yet our seat at the celebration of the saints is paid for and reserved in our name; the payment already made, admission already been taken care of by the blood of Christ, the blood of the Lamb, the self-same blood in which those who have come through the great ordeal have washed their robes to a dazzling white, the clothing of purity.

Such dress is of key importance to Christians, every bit as important as Penn State fans' blue and white and the stylized symbol of the Nittany Lion. This ecclesiastical garb, these white robes, are used in our worship service to mark three key stages in our journey of faith. The first white robe we wear is at our baptism, just like Alexis Nicole Miller this morning. Again, when those baptized as infants, take the baptismal vows for themselves, confirming the promises made by their parents, they too will be robed in white. And finally, at the end of our earthly life, when we're covered in the white pall over the urn which holds our ashes or the casket which holds our body. So it is that our inclusion into the white robed saints begins with our baptism when we become the adopted children of God. Welcome to the family Alexis Nicole.

Children of God. That's the identity that we're given at our baptism; we are no longer children of the world. And there's the rub. It's here that our great struggle begins, the struggle between living as children of God, and seeing ourselves as children of the world, and what a struggle that is, for baptism doesn't magically change us; rather it sets us on a lifelong course of becoming Christ's men and women in the world. It's not an easy course to follow, for every suffering turn and travail we face in the world, as the gospel reminds us, is part of our being and becoming. There are great blessings to counter the pain and suffering and humiliation that living the faithful life inevitably brings. And herein lies a real and ever present danger of the world calling our identity as children of God into question, and the way the ways of the world can skew our understanding and undermine our hope. Yet we remain those who give our coats, who turn the other cheek; we remain the weak and the mourning; we remain those hungering after righteousness and seeking peace; and we are reviled and persecuted and rejected by a self-proclaimed, sophisticated, self-managing, all-powerful world.

It's in the face of all that, that we celebrate All Saints Sunday. And it's a reminder for us that trial and tribulation lie in our path, that we walk in the way of the cross. This struggle to be faithful is known, understood and observed by Christ, who at the last, through the power and authority given Him by God, will put aside our shortcomings and failures, sweep away the blots on our lives, and transform us into His brilliant likeness.

I guess living the Christian life is a little bit like going to a Penn State game. The first ordeal, Barbara and I discovered, was getting there. But that's alleviated when you finally arrive, with what we discovered are delightful tailgate luncheons, which fortify one after the trip and prepare one for the strenuous exercise of being fans in the stadium. But isn't that really the way we struggle through the week, and come here on Sunday somewhat bedraggled and beaten, to worship, where we're revived with word and bread and wine? But finally, for all of us, there's the last journey to one's place in the stadium, to join the crowd and participate in the game.

That's the funny thing about our life of discipleship. In reality, the end of things has already been decided. The Kingdom is there, ahead of us, waiting. But we're not there yet. No matter the faithfully departed are there ahead of us, waiting, worshiping, celebrating, and ready for us to join them when the time comes. I know this may sound impossible, like some sort of pie in the sky, but remember who we are: we're children of God. And like all children who start out their lives having only the vaguest notion of their parents, finally come to the point where they know more than their parents ever did. And then in the end, when they become parents themselves, begin to grasp the full extent of what had been done for them and how much they must do for their children as a result.

Just as children, human children, grow in their understanding of parents and living in the parental life, so we as Christians grow in our identity as we mature as children of God, and our understanding of Christ deepens and grows. So we join this celebration, giving thanks to God that we are His children and that in and through Christ, we will finally stand confident and unashamed, clothed in white before the throne of God, and we'll sing "This is the Feast" as we sing it now in grateful anticipation.

Just so the intermission at the Penn State game. The college band and the alumni band took to the field and students, faculty and alumni were invited to stand. The combined bands struck up the school song, and those in the crowd whose school it was sang. They sang it quietly, they sang it emotionally, they sang it endearingly, in honor of their school. And just like the grace of God, high above the stadium on the great big screen, for those who couldn't quite get it right, were the words of the song.

Amen.