

The Communion of Saints

All Saints Sunday
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Revelation 7:9-17;
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.

I received a letter this week from an old friend back in my hometown in New Zealand. It begins, “I thought you would like to know that Sir John Thorn passed away last night.” The letter goes on to recount his final days spent with family and friends, and then of that final evening when family gathered at his bedside, and he died peacefully. The letter closes with, “He often spoke of you and wondered how you were getting on.” That letter unleashed in me a string of memories of family, friends, parishioners, whom I have known and loved and who have died, and in many cases, whom I have buried.

With those memories there came a deep sense of longing to be with them, to have once again their company and their conversation and their presence. That’s the way it is I think, for many of us today, when we remember not only those from this congregation who have died this past year, but all those to whom we have bid our last farewell. But there is more, much, much more, before us in our worship today. Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday, both with a capital “S” Saints and a small “s” saints. It’s a time to remember and give thanks to God for those we have known and loved, as well as those with whom we have had differences and even those from whom we have become estranged. We remember all those persons who have had some sort of impact on our lives, who have influenced our faith development, and whose memories we cherish, even though they now rest from their labors.

The biblical themes today, you see, have encouraged and sustained the church down through the ages as it has struggled to live in a world often only too eager to forget the past and all too often fearful and unwillingly to face an uncertain future. Yet the texts before us this morning remind us of our connectedness to a vast community of God’s people of every age and generation, among whom we are included as sisters and brothers.

The first lesson depicts the faithful gathered before the throne worshiping God, and our worship echoing theirs this morning, especially – did you notice the words of the hymn of praise, echoing Revelation, echoing the Kingdom itself? – “This Is the Feast.” Though these saints are themselves people who have suffered, they take no delight in their own accomplishments, but they take every delight in God, to whom salvation belongs and from whom salvation has its genesis.

Such an amazing community, marked by breathtaking diversity! Its members are drawn from every nation, from every people, from every language, from every persuasion . . . and yet they speak with a common voice as they sing together the same song. A great, vast community that claims a bonding that transcends death. On the one hand the future remains unknown, the details are blurred; on the other hand the future is secured, as the second lesson proclaims we are

children of God now – “What we do know is this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is.”

So too the Beatitudes, which speak to us of both blessing and promise. When you read them, when you really stop to read them, our breath is taken away with the surprise and colossal nature of these promises, backed by the commitment of Jesus Christ, Himself. They are promises that not only are oriented to an existence beyond the grave, but also have a profound impact and influence on the way each and every one of us lives today.

For example, those who are falsely maligned and who suffer various sorts of opposition and persecution in this life for the sake of the gospel, they are told that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Our Christian history abounds with dramatic examples of those victimized, and even killed, in the cause of righteousness; but the promise also holds for those not so dramatically persecuted. Some of you right among us, experiencing opposition in much less intense forms, but singled out nonetheless for slander and rejection and ridicule.

But neither suffering nor death is the end of the story. Heaven you see, whatever it is, becomes a dwelling place where the long line of persecuted prophets, faithful disciples, and yes, beloved, ordinary Christians just like you and me, who have come to experience it.

On All Saints' Day we celebrate the promise that God has not forgotten the poor in spirit, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the meek. "Blessed are the meek," said Jesus, "for they will inherit the earth." You know, in the original Greek "meek" meant, literally, the "tamed" or the "broken," in the sense that a wild horse is broken to be ridden. You see a wild horse is of absolutely no use to anyone, but a "meek" or "gentled," horse can carry even small children. Meekness, beloved, is a matter of submission, submission to the will of God. And yes, I know how hard it is to accomplish that.

But it is the last beatitude that has a strange twist for those of us who still live. We are invited, not to expect an instant reward, but rather to be comforted by the future promise of the Kingdom won for us already through Christ. We are exhorted to take heart in the face of opposition and distress and grief, to trust joyfully in the promises we have been so graciously given.

Put another way, we are celebrating God's vindication of the saints who have suffered, and it carries with it encouragement for those who still daily struggle against the forces of oppression in the marketplace, or in the home, or in the courts, or in the government. There may be many battles that seem to be lost, even wounds to be borne, but the final outcome never is in doubt. "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus says, "for they shall be comforted." Do you hear the blessing and the promise? When our thoughts move from the host of disciples of the past who have faithfully served the cause of justice in ways great or small, to particular departed saints we have known, then the mood of celebration is often tinged around the edges with our grief. Familiar faces begin to appear – parents, spouses, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, grandchildren, cherished individuals whose separation from us means deep, deep pain and remorse. We say to ourselves, we can celebrate with our heads, but our hearts remain heavy. The verb "mourn" in this text is an inclusive word, embracing a whole spectrum of experiences. In this context, it most naturally pictures the plight of those who are heartsick because things are not right with the world, because injustice and suffering are still rampant. But it also includes the situation of those who grieve because of loss. Remember what Paul said? Death is part of

what is wrong in the world. Do you remember what he called it? “The last enemy.” Thus the Beatitude offers a blessing to those who face the communion of saints and still have mixed feelings, with grief as well as celebration. They, too, are not forgotten, and for them Jesus promises comfort.

So what does all of this look like in the real world? I think it is something like this. A few years ago a group of Christians from the United States visited war-torn Nicaragua. While there, a young man in this group was killed by the Contras. This left the group confused, bitter, anguished, and full of questions. On the following Sunday, they attended a local worship service, where a memorial was held for the young man. From the altar the Nicaraguan priest said, "The peace of the Lord be with you" and people from the congregation, Nicaraguan people, began to embrace these Americans and say, "Paz", "peace," as you and I will do in a few moments this morning. These people, these Nicaraguans, who had suffered in so many ways, reached out of their suffering to the suffering of the young Christian group in their midst.

Then the congregation was silent during the Communion. Into that silence, someone called out a name, and every Nicaraguan in the congregation responded, "Presente!" Another name was called out. Once again the response was, "Presente!" It was as though a roll call was being taken at a school. During the service at least twenty names were called out, and each time the same response: "Presente!" Ron DelBene, the pastor leading this American group of Christians, couldn't figure out what on earth was going on. Until he heard one name – Oscar Romero. Then he realized that all the names were those of persons who had died. From that moment on he joined in shouting of "Presente!"

In a few moments, we'll gather at the Lord's table. For us, the word "presente" means “present,” “with us,” "in our midst," Shouting "Presente!" in the worship service was a way of proclaiming the reality of the communion of saints for those people in war-torn Nicaragua. So it is for us, that the presence and companionship for which I deeply long is to be found here in worship, among you, receiving the body and blood of Christ. Gathering with you and all the faithful that we remember in the reality we confess as the communion of saints. Welcome. Welcome to that gathering, with its pain and its promise.

Amen.