

“Ordinary Saints”
1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18; 1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 7: 9-17
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Dr. Catherine Taylor
November 5, 2017

This week is another week when all kinds of things are happening.

On Tuesday we have an important election that will influence the direction of state and local government.

At the state level in particular important issues weigh in the balance and our being able to vote on how things should go is all to the good.

On the bad side some of the rhetoric has been disheartening.

While we should be grateful for freedom of speech, there is no question that some of what we must endure in order to enjoy this freedom is far from edifying or enlightening.

Today is also, for us, All Saints Sunday.

During the communion prayer we will read the necrology, the names of those in the congregation who have died in the past 12 months.

This is a longer list than I have ever read in any year of my ministry. A bell will toll three times after groups of names representing our triune God.

Traditionally All Saints is a day to reflect on both the reality of death and the lives of those in the church who have gone before us, to recall what they sacrificed, what they built, and what they have passed on.

According to the Reformed Tradition and to the apostle Paul, we are *all* saints, not just those whose devotion is seen somehow as exceptional.

We celebrate that reality, too, today when we come to the table, believing that the saints of the past and the saints of the present, all of us, are united as we share Christ’s holy meal.

Finally, today is Stewardship Dedication day.

During the offertory those who wish to may come forward and place your pledges in the basket up front.

Since all of Christian life is about service and generosity, both fiscal generosity and generosity of spirit, in some sense we talk about stewardship all year long.

But once a year we ask for financial commitments from everyone so the elders can plan our ministry accordingly.

There is something very fitting about the confluence of an election, All Saints, and Stewardship.

It reminds us better than anything else might do that as Christians we are not of-the-moment-people.

Our actions toward tomorrow are not based solely on what is happening to us today.

We have inherited both our political freedoms
and our faith from people who came before us.
We have the same responsibility they had
to ensure the political integrity and the faith of the future.
Many of us if asked could name the person whose example
taught us to vote, or volunteer, or to work for your particular candidate.
And if we close our eyes many of us can also see
the ones who taught us to love and serve God,
and to give and support the church.

In keeping with the many things before us today,
I have mixed up the Lectionary texts for All saints
and the 27th Sunday after Pentecost.
The reading from Revelation is the most grand.
It tells of a great gathering of those who have suffered for faith.
Revelation was written at a time when Christians could be arrested,
and some of them were put to death.
All kinds of writings filled with visions and great battles
were extremely common at that time, and really popular, too.
Not many people could read, and so stories that were read aloud with great scenes
of struggle and triumph and feasts were entertaining for listeners.
Such stories were the action movies of their day.¹
So it's logical that writers for the church would use this kind of writing, too,
called apocalyptic literature, to bring hope to Christians
who were living in fear and who needed words of hope and comfort.
In the Book of Revelation, Rome is disguised as Babylon,
and all manner of strange and mighty things go on
not because they are being predicted to happen in real life,
but as a way letting Christian people hear a story
where the weak win out over the strong.
And so we get a beautiful vision of heaven
where those who had suffered for their faith are robed in white
and standing before God in a throne room.
Women and men who have been imprisoned and starved,
staked out in the sun without water,
are surrounded by holy creatures and songs full of
honor, safety, and beauty and best of all,
the promise that there will be no tears anymore.
It is a beautiful promise of God's faithfulness,
not a blueprint of heaven.

Beside this vision, we have more from Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica.
He is writing to church people who expect
the end of time to come any minute.
Some of them are worried and frightened, fearing for loved ones
who have died already.
Will they take part in the promise of resurrection
or did they die too soon?
Paul is offering comfort, saying not to worry about the beloved dead.
Some have died, and we too will die,
but when Jesus comes into his kingdom, *all* will be resurrected.

At this writing Paul thought this final resurrection would happen soon.
Later he realized it was not to be immediate.
But what he says here in our text
is what the Church still proclaims about resurrection:
that it will happen for all people at the end of time.

Even so, we often speak of the dead as being with God immediately.
And why not?
Who knows what time and space are like
in the region beyond this life?

Again, we are invited to see Paul's ideas
as *words of comfort and of hope*

not some kind of blueprint or map of heaven.

If you happen to like Gospel Music, think of it this way:

You don't have to study the time tables of heavenly trains,
to be comforted by a song filled with images of speeding toward God.

Our last reading is more down to earth.

The writer of First John does not try to tell us where beloved saints have gone.

He just says we are God's children *now*,
an image of being loved and cherished as by a parent.

The world may not know us, but we know each other,
and we can love as we are loved.

What we will be after death will be revealed;

Then we will see Jesus as he is.

Those are comforting words for anyone who struggles with faith now.

There are things we'd like to know now about the next life.

We can't know them. But we'll find out.

Meanwhile the work of saints like us is to be hopeful. That's all.

The rest, such as loving as purely as Jesus loves,
will be given to us.

The closet we can come now is to gather round the table
with all the company of heaven.

"All the company of heaven" says Frederick Buechner,

"means everybody we ever loved and lost,
including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them
or didn't love at all.

It means people we never heard of.

It means everybody who ever did

—or at some unimaginable time in the future ever will—

come together at something like this table
in search of something like what is offered at it."

"Whatever other reasons we have for coming to such a place," he writes,

"if we come also to give each other our love
and to give God our love, then together with
the angels...and the man on the corner and the old lady whose teeth don't fit,
and Teresa in her ecstasy, we are the communion of saints."ⁱⁱ

Two of the ordinary saints who are now at that table in heaven
are my nephew Ned Jr. and my half-brother, Warren.

Warren, died two weeks ago at the age of 96,
a decorated veteran of WWII, a husband and father,
with many grandchildren and great grandchildren.
Neddy, as Ned Jr. was known,
died fifty years ago this month at age fourteen
of a rare genetic disease whose diagnosis a year after his death
saved the lives of two of his six siblings.
Next week Warren's family will gather at a National Cemetery
in California to lay him to rest.
In New Jersey, Neddy's family will gather at his grave
to mark the 50th anniversary of his death.
I cannot go to either of those gatherings,
but Warren and Neddy will both be near me
as we come to the table today.

And there will be other saints at the table as well.
Many in your hearts and many from the Bible.
A young boy stepped forward on a hillside centuries ago
and offered the disciples a few pieces of bread and fish.
Jesus was able to take that small gift
and turned it into a miracle of abundance.
Depending on how you interpret that story,
it was either a true miracle of multiplication
or a miracle of generosity, as others pulled what they had
from their bundles to share.
But without the boy, there might have been no story.
Not long before Jesus was arrested and put to death,
a woman poured scented oil on him as a gesture of love.
Jesus told his disciples that wherever the Gospel is preached
she would be remembered.
In both the case of the boy and the woman
neither did anything amazing or miraculous.
At the time they each performed a simple act of generosity,
doing the most faithful thing they could.
Faithful people doing what it is in their power to do
is the very definition of sainthood.
And as far as I'm concerned, the choices made by the boy and the woman
were stewardship decisions.
One chose to share what little he had,
knowing as he did so that it was not enough.
The other chose to spend extravagantly
in order to honor the Lord at least one more time.
I have heard stewardship stories of course
about the other kind of saint, the exceptionally devoted miraculous kind,
who did such amazing things with even a small income
they could give huge amounts to a college or a charity or a church.
Bettie Birthright, a slave once owned by my Virginia relatives,
worked as a cook after emancipation,
and her husband, Charles, as a barber.
In 1917 the Birthrights left a vast fortune to Tuscaloosa Institute,
known today as Stillman College,

the largest endowment ever given at the time
and for many years after.ⁱⁱⁱ

I am not a stewardship saint. I am the ordinary kind.

Give me the boy with the fish and the loaves,
or the woman with the expensive perfume,
people who were moved by Christ
to do simple things that felt right at the time.

There is one thing about those simple acts, though,
that we'd be wise not to miss:

The boy handing over fish and the woman spilling perfume took risks.
Real risks.

No one accused the boy of being foolish,
But some in the crowd who saw him pull out his offering
probably thought he was.

The woman was openly accused and ridiculed
for wasting money that might have been spent on the poor.

These good people, ordinary saints, acted anyway, moved by faith to risk.

The vision in Revelation is an image of risk, too.

It takes quite an act of faith to rely in this divisive day and age
on the promise of a multitude of every nation, tribe and language
one day gathered before the Lamb of God.

Once that image was a counter-vision to the terror of persecution.

Today it's a reminder of who we actually are:
the communion of ordinary saints whose work is to be hopeful,
doing what we can and trusting
that every needful thing will be given to us. AMEN.

ⁱ I learned this way of thinking about apocalyptic literature in a class taken in at Montreat in June 2011 with professor Lisa Davidson of Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa Oklahoma.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 30–1., found online at <http://cruciality.wordpress.com/2009/08/25/frederick-buechner-on-the-communion-of-saints/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The story is well known in my family, and can be found in the February 25, 2014, *Daily Dunklin Democrat*, online at <http://www.dddnews.com/story/2052002.html>