

“For ALL the Saints!”

Revelation 7: 9 – 17

I John 3: 1 – 3

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On this day, and every day, but especially on this day we celebrate one of our faith truths; that we are surrounded! On this All Saints Day Sunday we often refer to the passage in the letter to the Hebrews. It’s a passage that follows a list of the faithful from Moses to Gideon to Barak, David and I would add Deborah and Pricilla and Sara, and after the recounting of this list of faithful, the scripture reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us!”

‘Surrounded by such a cloud of witness! Can you feel it? ‘Since’ we are surrounded, not ‘if’, but a given. Surrounded by such a cloud, such a gathering of those who carried and lived a faith that can redeem even us, therefore, we can throw off that which is weighting us down and fly! (Yes, a bit of preacher paraphrasing here.)

‘So great a cloud of witnesses’ beautiful Biblical imagery of the saints, an image that we pull out often on this first Sunday after All Saints Day. Another scripture that is just as poetic and favored on this day comes from that book in the Bible that is probably not a favorite of many, the book of Revelation. It’s one of, if not *the* most poetic and mystical and *misinterpreted* books of our Bible. A part of the church in more modern times looks to it as a code to decipher the end days, to predict the end of the world, instead of reading it for what it is; words of hope to a persecuted community at that time. Reading now from the 7th chapter of the book of Revelation:

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands....and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7: 9 – 17)

The writer John of Patmos, exiled to an island, put into words his conviction of his faith in the love of God that conquers even death; this multitude surrounding the throne, “Look, they will hunger and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them any

more, the Lamb at the center will guide them to springs of Living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eye.”

And so we have two images of saints on this Sunday, a great cloud of witnesses, those robed in white who have withstood the great ordeal and are now with God; both images that are comforting, hope filled and very much make up our picture of saints. ‘Those who have gone before’ as in those who we will recognize with gratitude in just a moment. And there is more. Yes, the good news is that there is more, for those who have gone before us make up only a part of the picture. We make up another part!

That’s right, you and me. Have you ever thought of yourself as a ‘saint’? Today we tend to think of a saint as one who is so perfect, has done no wrong or those who helped form our faith and have now passed on or, as defined by the Roman Catholic church, one who has passed on and after their death have met a number of criteria including a miracle occurred in their name. But in scripture, in the writings to the early church, the word saints comes from a Greek word which means ‘consecrated to God, holy, sacred and refers to the body of Christ as in the church universal. Listen to these words from Acts, chapter 9: ‘Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived in Lydda.’ In other words, those followers trying to be faithful in that region. And can we not add, those followers trying to be faithful today?

Yes, today we remember and celebrate those who have gone before us. We also recognize and affirm our place in and connection to that cloud of witnesses, who are working in and through us here on earth as they are in heaven. Today’s scripture from I John that Ciara read adds to that picture, reminding the community of faithful that through God’s love, they are/we are called children of God. No, not perfect but even so, still God’s children, trying to walk in the way of Jesus. Sainthood as in perfect, no, but saints as in trying to live faithfully, by loving God and by loving neighbor as self.

So our picture of saints on this day has perhaps expanded from those who are in heaven to those of us on earth as well, from scripture, those of us in all places and all lands who make up the church, trying to follow in the way of Jesus (remember, Jesus did not say, ‘worship me’ but ‘follow me’.) That expanded picture gives us a sense of responsibility but also, I hope, a sense of encouragement; that as we stumble and fall and pick ourselves up again on our faith journeys, as we become frustrated and tired, there is a community that extends beyond time that we are a part of. It reminds me of a recent Facebook post that reads, “Suddenly all my

ancestors are behind me. ‘Be still’, they say. ‘Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.’

And, I add, not only the result, but bearers of that love as well.

I would like to take just a few more minutes to ponder adding to our circle of Saints. We sing ‘For ALL the saints. What does that mean? From what I just said, scripturally it has to do with the Christian community who tries to live faithfully in addition to those in the community who have passed on. ‘Saint’ by its origin, is a word that defines one in the Christian community. But in our world we have seen the hateful results of limiting ‘children’ of God to mean one religion or faith only. And we know to just call ourselves Christian is not enough. We as Christians tend to overlook the genocide in Rwanda, the most Christian nation in Africa, we tend to forget those Christians who did not stand up against the Hitler terror and many who walked our Jewish brothers and sisters to the gas chambers and stood guard at the concentration camps; we don’t want to admit those who called themselves Christian also slaughter Native Americans, kept slaves, and were and still are a part of racist groups like the Klan. Just to call oneself Christian but not live a life of radical, inclusive love flies in the face of the way to which Jesus calls us.

Last Wednesday I was gifted with the opportunity to hear Rabbi Dr. Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi at the interfaith Moosnick lecture at Transylvania University. One point in particular stuck with me. She said that she believes that only we (and we here defined as we the faithful of all religions), that only we can save each other. That only by listening to and accepting and giving hospitality to and reaching out to can we together redeem the world. That somehow me living out my Christian faith at its best is about embracing the other who is trying to live out their faith at its best. That ‘best’ is defined as seeing the divine image in all of humanity and walking in the way of love. I wonder if our world today needs to redefine the community of saints to include an even wider circle of those of all faiths who are trying the best they are able to walk in the way of radical, inclusive love for all of God’s children and all of God’s creation.

That may be a threatening picture to some. To me, it expands the great cloud to include Gandhi, Rabbi Heschel who walked side by side with Martin Luther King Jr, to include the Dali Lama and so many more who seem to embody a divine force of Love that is and always has been present in our world.

Just think of it – we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, those who have gone before us paving the way of love and light and are there by their witness

giving us strength and purpose to carry on, to be witnesses to that love and light as well – thanks be to God! Surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses...it's not all about us, we are not alone, in our joys, in our sorrows, in our struggles, in our celebrations, we are a part of a community that is greater than even our definitions. A community on earth and in heaven, all held by God, as children of God.

We move now into a time in our worship service that is a very dear tradition here. As we read the names of family and friends who have passed away since this time last year, we affirm our shared community, and are reminded of our scripture that 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'.