

Ghosts and Saints
Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-15 & Matthew 25:1-13; All Saints; Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

Last week Jill and I hit an unprecedented milestone in our sixteen-and-a-half year marriage. Believe it or not, as of November 1st we have lived in Roanoke longer than anywhere else. Truly! We married right out of college, and for two years we remained in Arkansas. Immediately after that, we lived in Chicago for graduate school; then Jackson, Tennessee (Erin Hensley's hometown) for two years; then seminary in Austin, Texas for three; and finally Memphis for four years and two months. On November 1st we exceeded the Memphis record. So you see, relatively speaking, it seems to us as if we've been here among you a long time!

It turns out our experience is not in the least unusual. The U.S. Census Bureau says that seventy-five percent of American families now move, on average, once every five years. Almost fifteen percent of Americans move *every* year. If you don't like your neighbors, be patient. Chances are next year you'll have new ones.

Of course, that's not to say that everyone moves with such frequency. Still today, and perhaps especially in the South, some choose to remain in their hometown for an entire lifetime. A couple of years after law school, my older brother joined my father's small town Arkansas firm and will likely practice there until retirement. Even so, staying involves decision in a way that it once did not. Remaining in one's hometown is now, more than in generations past, a conscious *choice*, weighed against the allure of the big city, or the job prospect two states away, or the extended family tug of a spouse from another region of the country. My own brother briefly lived in Scotland and Little Rock before returning home. Staying is no longer a given, but rather one option among many. And even when one stays, on average seventy-five percent of those among whom one was raised leave, which can render the hometown community as foreign as if one had himself moved to London or New York.

And we lose something. This is, I suspect, why we are so enthralled by literary and cinematic images that hearken to the small town: Wendell Berry novels or the Mitford books, Andy Griffith reruns or modern-day idylls like "The Gilmore Girls."

Sometimes these images embody the sense of loss, as in Iris DeMent's song "Our Town," where she spends one final evening in the town of her birth before moving away forever:

I'm leaving tomorrow but I don't wanna go.
I love you, my town, you'll always live in my soul.

But I can see the sun's settin' fast,
And just like they say, nothing good ever lasts.
Well, go on, I gotta kiss you goodbye,
But I'll hold to my lover,
'Cause my heart's 'bout to die.
Go on now and say goodbye to my town, to my town.
I can see the sun has gone down on my town, on my town; Goodnight.

What we lose, what we yearn for through book and movie and song, is rootedness, depth of connection. We sense that it's gone missing. A decade ago, Robert Putnam wrote his renowned book *Bowling Alone*, which chronicled this breakdown of community. His prevailing image was the solitary bowler who hurls his metaphoric ball down the lane, replacing the old-time bowling league that brought people together in community and common purpose.

And Putnam wrote years before MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter entered the scene as our society's attempts to revive community in virtual form, as we vainly exalt the one hundred-forty characters of a tweet in place of real and vulnerable conversation between people.

It's as if we've become shadows of real people, ghosts of a sort, who wisp by one another in the world, communicating through ethereal means like email and text messages and never staying in one place long enough to gain substance. We remind me of the ghosts in C.S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce*, who are so immaterial that real blades of grass pierce their feet and cause them pain when they walk. The ghosts have become so unaccustomed to real life in real community that when they encounter it, it hurts them.

Is this our danger? And what does it have to do with All Saints Sunday? Well, elsewhere C.S. Lewis compares those ghosts to *saints*. What's the difference between the two? In his book *Miracles* (which we'll study at the Gathering next week) he says, a "difference of atmosphere...surrounds the words 'I saw a ghost' and the words 'I saw a saint'—all the pallor and unsubstantiality of the one, all the gold and blue of the other."ⁱ Ghosts are gauzy; saints are solid.

Where do we see saints, and where do we become them? *Only here, in the life of this Body, the church*. It is here, even in the torrent of cultural change that strips us of deep relationships, real community, and actual human connection...It's *here*, even in the midst of all of that, that we can become *solid*. When we walk through these doors, we do not slip by one another as ghosts and strangers, but rather meet one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We enter into the *Communion of Saints*.

Here, we can find permanence of place. We can look into one another's eyes and learn one another's stories. We can share what hurts us and what we love. We can honor the generations who've gone before us and prepare something worth keeping for those yet to come.

This Communion of Saints, we say we believe, extends across space and across time. And so, we can read about Joshua and the Israelites and the challenges they faced in a time of flux, when Joshua wisely counseled them to reaffirm their commitment to the loving God, alone in whom they are able to find a shared identity. We can read this and say, "Yes, that's us, too! They're related to *us*, and they're telling *our* story."

We can read Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids and embrace the call to keep *our* lamps lit, so that we can see when Christ arrives among us through the church doors—through the one in need, the one in sorrow, the one in joy—so we can go out to meet him and welcome him in.

We can step out of the ghostly world outside and recognize that *this* is God's vision for the real world. Our relationships *out there* have become virtual, but the character of the relationships to which God calls us *here*, in which we love one another and are *willing to be loved* by one another, are *actual*.

We *can* be grafted into the Communion of Saints. In this, at least, I know what I'm talking about. Somewhere along the way Jill and I and our family no longer felt like ghosts and interlopers but as members of the Body of Christ in this place.

On this All Saints Day we celebrate especially, because today we graft new members into this Communion through baptism. Many of these are children, who will grow up outside of this place knowing nothing other than the shallow and ephemeral way in which people increasingly walk through the world. That makes our role as *saints to them* all the more important and crucial. It falls to us, with the grace of God as helpmate, to show them how to light the lantern and abide in God's love.

We've all moved about the world as ghosts long enough that entrance into the Communion of Saints may hurt at first. We are no longer accustomed to the solidity of deep relationships and the vulnerability they require. We initially may be reluctant and tentative; the blades of grass may be sharp on our insubstantial feet. But as with C.S. Lewis' ghosts and saints, the saints, past and present, are here to let us lean on them. If we'll attend to them and their stories, they'll support us and show us the way until we're good and solid again. After all, that's what makes them saints. On this day we give thanks for them, and we thank God that we are here.

Amen.

ⁱ Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*, pg. 147.