

Blessed Communion – Fellowship Divine!

Revelation 7:9-17

Hebrews 12:1-2

1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 51-58

November 5, 2023

All Saints Sunday

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A well-known mid-20th century pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, in New York, and a teacher of preachers at Harvard Divinity School, George Buttrick, said to his young preachers-to-be, “Don’t tell them about the New Jersey boardwalk. They already know about the boardwalk. Tell them about the deep blue sea!” And a much-published current preacher, James Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte said about the purpose of a sermon, “The sermon peers into God’s castle, not our own navel”ⁱ

On All Saints Sunday we peer into the vast depths of the deep blue sea and are transported to the entryway of the heavenly throne room. John in the Revelation is shown by the Risen Christ into the throne room of heaven. Here he sees a glorious celebration, the saints and martyrs who suffered in this life and died for their faith, now unite as a great multitude from every nation and tribe and peoples and language. They stand before the throne and before the lamb. They are clothed in white robes, signifying the new life they have received their stained robes clean, made white by the red blood of the Lamb, Jesus who shed his blood on the cross for them. They are waving palm branches, Roman symbols of victory.

They worship God and the Lamb, singing loudly and joyfully! Suffering and death are transformed into victory and life! No longer is Jesus beaten and abused by the powers of earth. Now he rules and reigns over the cosmos. We are not controlled by the planets and the stars. The planets and stars are controlled by him. God and the Lamb are in charge and the saints are changed! They worship God singing,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!
Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” Revelation 7:10, 12

On All Saints Day we gaze, together with the blest communion, the fellowship divine, into the great beyond, life forever with the Lord. After all the struggles, all the challenges of this world, filled with wars and sickness and shootings and manmade and natural disasters, these are done. This is the completion of all things when, as St. Augustine, the greatest theologian of all the ages, living in the 4th century A.D. concludes in the City of God,

“For everyone God will be all in all. Our desire will have attained its end and will be wholly formed and concentrated on him. He will be seen without end, loved without satiation, and praised without weariness. God is inexhaustible.”ⁱⁱ

Because of Jesus Christ,

We will one day experience for ourselves what I shared with you last week, the remark of our five-year-old grandson Winfield when his other grandmother, in Nashville, Gigi after picking him up from his Christian Pre-school and getting him a snack and going to a park to play, Gigi pointed out to him the beautiful blue blue cloudless October sky. Winfield said, "Yes Gigi, it's like God took a big paint brush and painted it all blue." Gigi said, "Isn't that amazing", Winfield laughed and said, "Oh Gigi, God can do anything!"

This is what the saints are experiencing in the throne room of heaven. God can do anything! This is what Paul is reminding the wavering Corinthians of in this great 15th Chapter of the hope that lies before them, and us because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and our trust in him.

I

Paul begins by reminding them of the things "of first importance." He goes to great lengths in this chapter to discuss the nature of the resurrection because some of the Corinthians, leaning more into their Greek philosophical background than into the Gospel, are treating the resurrection casually, or with condescension, or as merely a metaphor. Treating it as a vague illusory thing. Like when we hear of God referred to as the "Man upstairs." Greeks believed in ideas. They wanted abstract wisdom as many of their great philosophers taught. They believed the body was bad. Paul goes to great length to discuss the resurrection of Jesus bodily, and to demonstrate the body is good, and how in Christ we will be given a new transformed spiritual body. Paul declared emphatically Christ has been raised!

He begins with the essence of the Gospel. Of first importance - that Christ died for our sins, was raised on the third day and seen by first a few, then 500 at once, and finally by Paul himself.

Here is the essential Christian proclamation. Here is the heart of the Good News! Everything about our faith begins here. Without the death of Jesus on the cross, an event recorded in secular history as well as sacred scripture, without a real bodily resurrection of Jesus, seen by those who had faith, even wavering faith, there would be no Christianity. Everything about the early Church and the spread of the Gospel across the Roman world begins here, in Jesus' death and resurrection.

In the great mystery of the Cross, in a way that we cannot fully explain, though many have tried, Jesus, like a sponge absorbs all the sin of the world onto himself. Your sin. My sin. The World's sin. Jesus takes it all. As Paul writes the Corinthians in his second letter, "God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."ⁱⁱⁱ Literally, on the cross Jesus absorbed into his own personhood all our evil and ugliness into his own body. He took it all. He took what is ours, our sin, and through his once and for all time sacrifice bears in his body the sin of the whole world.

On May 19 Presbyterian Pastor Tim Keller died after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. His funeral was held in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral on 5th Avenue with Cardinal Timothy Dolan welcoming the overflowing crowd coming from all over the world! God used Tim Keller in remarkable ways through the Redeemer Presbyterian Church he planted and grew in New York City. We have used many of his books in our classes and studies here. His final book, completed after he received his cancer diagnosis, and after the covid pandemic, is entitled, Hope in Times of Fear – The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter. In the Introduction he writes,

“The first step is to believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really happened. The resurrection is of little use as a mere symbol... The resurrection is not a stupendous magic trick but an invasion. And the event that saved us – the movement from cross to resurrection – now remakes the lives of Christians from the inside out, by the power of the Spirit....

The Cross and the resurrection together – and only together – bring the future new creation, the omnipotent power through which God renews and heals the entire world, *into our present.* ^{iv}

These are the things of first importance.

II

Then, Paul goes on to show us this a great mystery. “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die,” but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Changed! What sort of body will we have in heaven? We can only imagine. But Paul describes here that yes, we will have a body. Jesus showed us the human body is good, for Jesus, Holy God came in a human body. But in Heaven, not a body that ages, grows sick and weak and dies, because death will be all past. We will have a new spiritual body. Paul writes these Corinthians, “For we know that if the Earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

We will have personhood. We are told in the Westminster Catechism, “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory.” You see the soul is the part of us, the inner eternal part of us, that is imperishable. The body dies. Life departs from our old temporary houses and we will enter a new spiritual remade body. But the soul continues with us as we move through different stages of our lives, and finally, as we move from this earthly life to life eternal. Paul writes these Corinthians, “For we know that if the Earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens... that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”

These last two months through September and October I have been to a slew of 50-year reunions. I have been to two High School 50th reunions, the reunion of the class I went through 10 years of schooling with in El Dorado, Arkansas, and another, the class I graduated with at McCallie School Chattanooga, Tennessee. Then a few weeks ago my Vanderbilt college fraternity class had a 50-year football reunion, for the Auburn- Ole Miss game. Yet again, I participated electronically in the inauguration of our Princeton Seminary's new President with many classmates who with me graduated 42 years ago. In all these reunions I was reconnecting with old friends and classmates. Everybody but me looked older! But their personalities continued, their habits- their quirks, good and bad- were still there.

Our cells die off completely, we are told, every seven years. We are made of different organic material stuff now than we were 50 years ago. Still we are us. At these reunions we recognized each other, sometimes only after looking really closely. Our bodies were different. But we were us. We laughed over the same pranks we played back then. We remembered! We were remembered!

In Heaven in our new spiritual bodies we are told in Scripture that we will be connected, in communion with God and with those we loved in this life. We will meet and connect with our balcony people, those teachers and coaches and mentors who cheered us on. Really all we know is yes, we will be changed, and we will be changed, and it will be good. As Paul says in this letter, "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."^v

J.R.R. Tolkien explains something of this difference between what we experience now and what, from the viewpoint of the next and grander life, we in Christ will one day experience. In the last volume of his Lord of the Rings trilogy. Sam Gamgee has been guarding his master, Frodo, during a harrowing journey through a deadly, evil country. At one point he rescued Frodo from a prison tower out of sheer force of will. Later he is falling asleep and sees a white star twinkling in the sky:

"The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment his own fate, and even his master's ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep."^{vi}

III

My friends, because of these first things of the death and resurrection of Christ we are assured that we will be mysteriously changed, given spiritual bodies, immortal, imperishable bodies. For "Death has been swallowed up in victory."^{vii} And we will be together. Together forever, united with the Lord and those we loved.

As today we remember with a tear in our eye those of our community here at South Highland who have gone on ahead, we look forward to a grand reunion one day.

After 22 years here as your pastor, there are so many lives who have touched mine, so many I have loved and shared life with, participating in their baptisms and weddings and homegoing celebrations, witnessing to the resurrection. Over 264 of them. There are those many of us knew; Corky Clark who called big church events, "The Big Whoop!" And sweet, quiet, powerful Greta Clark, who famously in a Session meeting when we were having to cut the budget some one year, "You'll cut the mission budget over my dead body!" We did not cut it! And steady, quiet, calm, wise John Benton. And Bob Hunter who knew us all by name, and every visitor by name and telephoned us regularly and called us, "You rascal you!" And Lyman Harris – a wise lawyer and Clerk of Session – who faced his terminal cancer with courage while he continued daily to read books about history.

One day we will all be together with these and so many more, because Heaven is for real. Dr. Eben Alexander, a Harvard brain surgeon had one of those near-death experiences, you may have heard of or even know someone, as I do, who experienced this. A person is declared clinically dead who comes back to life. In Proof of Heaven, Dr. Eben writes -

"My experience (of an NDE Near Death Experience) showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave. More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us and about where the universe itself and all the beings within it are ultimately going."^{viii}

That is what we experience a foretaste of here at this Table- here together, we are united with the Risen Christ who is here as our host. Yes, we are united with one another, here in this sanctuary and those joining us on-line. But also, with those, as our Great Thanksgiving Prayer puts it, "angels and archangels... and all the faithful of every time and place," We are connected spiritually.

One dear saint we are connected with at this table is sweet Julia Jones. Julia loved God and she loved South Highland. She was always here on Sundays and Wednesdays as long as her health permitted. Julia loved to paint- angels and churches – these were her favorites. We will be using her paintings on the covers of our Advent and Christmas bulletins. And what an astonishing gift she left the church this year in her will- the largest single gift ever given to this church - a gift of 1.6 million dollars! This will allow us to borrow from ourselves short term for the building repairs you have already so generously pledged to support, (and yes there is still time today to make your pledge if you have not yet done so!) And then those funds, repaid through your Building for the Future gifts, will support more ministry and mission, which Julia Jones' gift will make possible. Fittingly, on Christmas Evening 2019, E. Keith Williams a few years ago left his earthly tent to enter his heavenly home.

Dear family of Jesus, dear sisters and brothers, this Gospel is true, all that Jesus has done for us is for real. Of first importance, the invasion has happened. His Gospel of Good News is not simply given to get us into heaven. It does that, yes. But this Good News of Jesus is for us here and now, for the living of these days, that we may experience life to the full by surrendering to this Presence, to the resurrected Jesus. The same Jesus in his personality, who died on the cross is alive and offers you himself and a life of meaning and purpose, faith hope and love.^{ix} Come, dive into the deep blue sea! Gaze into God's castle! And sing, "My God, how great thou art!"

Amen.

ⁱ James Howell, Beautiful Words, p.38

ⁱⁱ St Augustine, The City of God, ch. xx

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Cor. 5:21, New Living Translation

^{iv} Timothy Keller, Hope in Times of Fear – The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter, pp. xx, xxi

^v 1 Cor. 13:12-12

^{vi} J.R.R. Tolkien, quoted by Timothy Keller, *ibid.* p.210-211

^{vii} 1 Cor. 15:54

^{viii} Eben Alexander M.D., Proof of Heaven, P.9

^{ix} Tony Campolo, Sermons from Duke Chapel, "Children of the Kingdom", p.295