

The Communion of Saints

November 3, 2019

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Pasadena, California

Revelation 7:

[9] After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,
[10] and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!"
[11] And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,
[12] saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."
[13] Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?"
[14] I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
[15] Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.
[16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
[17] For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

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One year in my ministry I conducted 30 funerals in twelve months. You would think, then, I wouldn't have wanted to visit a cemetery while on vacation that year. Well, think again.

You see, I have some very good friends who are New York Yankee haters. Maybe even some church members! They are more excited that the Yankees didn't go to the World Series this year, than they are that the Washington Nationals won it! So I decided in the year of the 30 funerals that since Elsie and I planned to go to New England for a week's fall vacation, we would drive to The Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Hawthorne, New York where Babe Ruth is buried and I would have my picture made kneeling at the Babe's grave while wearing my Yankee hat and sweatshirt and then send autographed

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copies of the photo to all my Yankee-hating friends at Christmas. And so we visited the Babe's grave and that of Billy Martin, which is close by. If you are a Yankee hater and want your own autographed copy, see me after church and place your order!

Then, after visiting the Gate of Heaven Cemetery, Elsie and I spent the next day at President Franklin and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's estate in Hyde Park, NY, where, again, we paid our respects at their graves. Even though I have some good friends who are Democrat haters, I resisted the urge to have my picture made at those graves.

The next day we drove on to Christ Lutheran Church, Middletown, Connecticut where I did my seminary internship in 1971-72. Although we visited no cemetery in Middletown, I was given a copy of their current parish directory by the secretary and quickly discovered that many of the people we had known there many years ago had died. I asked about a number of the people I had known and very often the secretary said, "They passed away." Or, "he died." It was the equivalent of going to a cemetery.

From Middletown we drove to Boston and, while there, we made a day trip to Quincy to visit the birthplaces, homes and graves of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams and their wives Abigail and Charlotte and the graves of many of their earlier relatives in the very old cemetery across the street from the church where they, the Presidents and their wives, are buried in the church basement. The next day we made a day trip to South Boston to Columbia Point to visit the JFK Presidential Library which has a very moving room with black walls where the only thing you see is a T.V. monitor replaying Walter Cronkite's November 22, 1963 announcement, "From Dallas, Texas, the flash - apparently official - President Kennedy died at 1:00 p.m. Central standard time, 2 p.m. Eastern standard time, some 38 minutes ago.

The next day we drove to Haverhill, Massachusetts to visit the farmhouse where John Greenleaf Whittier was born. He is the Quaker, abolitionist poet who wrote the hymn you grew up singing, "Dear Lord and Father Of Mankind." On the farm is the grave of Whittier's 4th great grandfather who established the place in the early 1600's. As we left Haverhill we drove by Union Cemetery where the poet was buried in 1892. From there we went to Concord, Massachusetts but we did not take the time to visit the graves of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, E.E. Cummings or Louisa May Alcott, my English major notwithstanding.

Why am I telling you all this?

Today is All Saints' Sunday. It is the day we remember and celebrate the lives of all of God's people. All of them. Those who have died and who are in The Church Triumphant. Those who are living and still present in The Church Militant.

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In The Lutheran Church's theology, you see, all it means to be a saint is that you belong to God. When you are baptized, public recognition is made of that. Being a saint has nothing to do with being better than someone else. Being a saint means you belong to God. God made you. Because he made you, you are holy, set apart. The more you are open to claiming that identity, the more you try to live to be the love of Christ to others.

There are well-known saints. Saint Frances. St. Christopher. Albert Schweitzer. Mother Teresa. Dorothy Day. Dorothea Dix. Joan of Arc. Most saints, though, including you and me, most people have never heard of and will never hear of.

Yet, all the saints have the same blood running in their veins— Christ's blood. Which makes us all related. You and I and Babe Ruth and John Greenleaf Whittier and Eleanor Roosevelt and all those people in the cemeteries here in Pasadena are all related.

So, even before I visit all those people in those cemeteries when I conduct a funeral, I am involved with our family. We are all family. You are a part of them. They are part of you. We are all knit together in the communion of saints. And taking walks in cemeteries is a celebration of that. As is coming to church to worship.

Now, I want to share something with you as I close which is personal and at times emotional.

I despise death. I am sick of it. There is too much of it everywhere. I do not want you to die. I do not want to die. If it were up to me, God would take us all up in a chariot, like Elijah.

I did not want my father and mother to die. I did not want Elsie's parents to die. I did not want any of the people whose funerals I have conducted in the last 46 years to die. I did not want my Aunt Willie Mae to die last December at 103. And there are many others I can name. And that you can name.

But, let me tell you something. God did not want his Son to die either. When that happened, it became very personal to God. And He decided to do something about it. And He did do something about it. Only He could do something about it. And He did.

So, as we say to remind ourselves, CHRIST IS RISEN! So, as we say to remind ourselves, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:8)

You know what: sometimes when I am out driving around on my way to make pastoral visits, I listen to hymns. It's the way I have my personal devotions. And as I listen to a hymn, sometimes the words touch my heart very deeply. This happened memorably once as I went to see a church member the year my Aunt Willie Mae died.

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The music I was listening to was a CD entitled *Great Hymns of Faith* by the St. Olaf Choir. One of those hymns caused me to have a very good therapeutic cry. Tears of joy, as well as of sorrow.

As I listened to the hymn, "Holy God We Praise Thy Name," before my mind's eye rushed all those people I know who have entered The Church Triumphant. And not just people who were relatives. Everyone who has ever lived who sought to follow Christ. And in the same split second there rushed before my mind's eye everyone who is still living who tries to follow Christ. All the saints. All of God's children, including each of you.

I would like us to sing this hymn together now. In celebration, to be sure, of all the saints of God, but more importantly, in celebration of the Holy God who continues in life and in death to claim us and make us His Very Own.

Amen.

Please turn to # 414 in the ELW hymnal.

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