

## **“The Communion of the Saints”**

Sermon by Joe Summers given on November 4th, 2007

(Texts: Sirach 44:1-10,13-14, Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12)

Gracious God, you have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth, let your anointing Spirit be upon us that we might experience and know the great communion that always sings your glory. Amen

Two weeks ago I talked about the great isolation that so many seem to be struggling against these days versus the web of grace, those grace filled connections that enable us to live and breathe and have our being. Today I want to relate those reflections to the Feast we are celebrating today, the Feast of All Saints, and what its vision of the communion of the saints might mean for us.

I want to begin my remarks with a quotation by the British Marxist cultural critic John Berger from an essay in his new book *Hold Everything Dear*.

“How do the living live with the dead? Until the dehumanization of society by capitalism, all the living awaited the experience of the dead. It was their ultimate future. By themselves the living were incomplete. Thus living and dead were inter-dependent. Always. Only a uniquely modern form of egoism has broken this interdependence. With disastrous results for the living, who now think of the dead as eliminated.”

(I want to point out that this quote suggests that not only are the dead no longer alive to the living, but they are now viewed as the equivalent of waste we don't value.)

Before the modern world, in so many cultures we know of, the living seemed to have experienced the dead as part of daily life. The wall that separated the living and the dead was, if not thin, than at least porous, the dead finding ways to reach out to the living, the living finding ways to reach out to the dead.

In his memoir the mystery writer Tony Hillerman describes life growing up in a poor rural family. One of the things he valued was his mother saying something like “Life is short and then we face the next great adventure.” That sense of being human as part of a cycle of life and death that proceeds us and comes after us, is so different than a view that says that only my life has meaning and when it's over there is nothing. I think John Berger is pointing towards the terrible loss and sadness that is a life that sees itself apart from the song of the universe and the overwhelming fear that happens when everything that is not us--- is experienced as somehow against us.

Fortunately, pre-modern cultures, worldviews and experience have continued to survive and often thrive in the midst of the modern world. As my own father was dying he began to be visited by long dead friends and family members. Later he said he didn't know whether he was

awake or asleep when this happened, but it didn't seem to matter to him. I asked him whether it felt frightening or strange. He said, "Not at all," it was simply so good to be able to see and talk with them after so many years. My dad loved life passionately and valued it infinitely until his very last breath, but I think this experience of the communion with the dead definitely helped him face death.

Karl Pohrt told me a story this week of the dedicating of a new exhibition of Indian artifacts in the Smithsonian. A traditional spiritual leader was invited to come and bless the space. At the blessing he said he had felt a lot of ambivalence about whether having these ancient artifacts of his people in a museum was a good thing or not. Then he had a dream. In his dream all the old ones were there. in the sky on their horses, and they were singing. When he awoke he knew this meant everything was okay.

How powerful it is when rather than experiencing the dead as reified, left static at the place they were when they died, they continue to live, change, speak to us, giving us permission to not stay in the place where they left things, encouraging us as we face our lives.

This is the vision of the communion of the saints. Last week Joe McDonald spoke of how, having had communion in different parts of the world, he now experiences those people as being part of our communion here, or all of us breaking bread different places being part of some greater communion. The vision of the communion of saints says that this communion is not just a communion of the living throughout the world, it is a communion that includes the dead.

Each year as people who have been beloved members of this community die, this vision becomes more and more real to me. For me, our circle includes whatever small or large group is gathered here on Sunday mornings but also:

Clifford Leonard, ever quirky, gracious, humorous—who found so much meaning in “this circle of clasped hands”

Lois Leonard, unflappable in her determination to improve things for a suffering humanity.

Kathleen Price, so frail and yet so strong in her, best of English culture, no-nonsense approach to life.

Beverly Slaughter, who helped sing this congregation into existence.

Terri (no meetings) Johnson, cheerfully determined to get done whatever needed to happen without a lot of fuss or talk or any meetings.

Margaret Perschbacher, maybe the only person in the world who could get a bunch of skeptical extroverts to do art and talk about their feelings.

Dick Wilds, the fighter who believed you could often get more good things out of losing than winning.

John Norton, our beloved greeter, who was able to communicate so much about being human while living with a dread illness like schizophrenia,

Herb Bush, as out there and outrageous as John like to be, so Herb seemed always quiet and sweet and dignified

Verna Vermett, modeling for us what it is to be willing to embrace the new and strange for life's sake

And there are so many others.

Someday I hope we might have a banner with all their faces so that others can see the communion that gathers here with me--calling me on--offering me courage when I feel fear, forgiveness when I feel guilt, joy when suffering seems too great, peace when all I feel is conflict.

The beatitudes are in part prophecy of what is to be, partly proclamation of what is. They say that there is a realm of grace in which things work nearly the opposite of how we see things working in the world of domination.

In our world we see that the little the poor have is continually taken away, but in the realm of grace they own the world. In our world those who deny grief seem to rule, in the realm of grace those who mourn are the ones who are comforted. In our world, to need justice and righteousness is to almost continually go hungry. In the realm of grace it is to be satisfied. In our world to be merciful sets you up for slaughter, in the realm of grace is to know mercy. In our world to be pure in heart is to know hell, in the realm of grace it is to see God. In our world to be a peacemaker is to be viewed as the ultimate fool or dupe, in the realm of grace it is to be recognized as born of God.

In the communion of the saints, we get to experience and know this realm of grace which helps lead us and guide us as we seek to see God's gracious rule happen in our world.

Most of the Hebrew Prophets seem to have come from those who in Hebrew are called "the anaweam," literally the little people of the land. This is not an accident for it was among such people that the Yahwist faith was preserved long after it had been turned into a vision of imperial domination among the elite and in the cities. It's clear Jesus was deeply immersed in the traditions preserved among the anaweam.

The anaweam are such a vital part of the communion of the saints. They are those our reading from Wisdom speaks of... "those who have no memorial, who have perished as though they have not lived; they have become as though they had not been born as have their children." But these were "people of mercy" and in the realm of grace, in the communion of the saints, their "righteous deeds will never be forgotten, their posterity will continue for ever. Their glory will not be blotted out." Their song will be heard forever.

In perhaps a bitter, or lucid, moment Hegel said "History is the story of the slaughterhouse." These days I feel the pall of death that the prophets spoke of as hanging over the nations. Sometimes it can feel like we're already dead, or so nearly so that folks are already getting ready to bury us. I feel what walking around with this sense of impending doom does to us. It's easy for death to gain dominion over our hearts. I see many succumbing to nihilism in a wide variety of different manifestations: terrorism, materialism, hedonism (though perhaps that's

more about eating than sex among the baby boomers these days), addiction, work (if focusing so much on work got us into this hole how can we talk ourselves into thinking that if we just work harder we'll get out of it?) privatism (people trying to create little utopias, or life rafts, just for themselves and/or their families), disassociation and fragmentation (if I just pretend it's not there maybe it isn't or maybe I can talk myself into believing everything is not connected.)

Contrast this nihilism with the vision we find in Revelations today.

The slaughter is still there. It is a vision of those who have come through the great tribulation. It's not clear whether they were slaughtered, or survived the slaughter, but, having washed themselves in the blood of the lamb, they now shine radiantly, surrounding the crucified God, singing and shouting "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to God for ever and ever."

And then we understand, this is not just a vision of the past or the future, It is a vision of an eternity in which we exist now -- a vision of how those of us who are facing the slaughter, or even in the midst of it, can simultaneously experience the reign of grace, the realm in which there is no hunger, no thirst, no scorching heat, the realm in which God is our shepherd guiding us to springs of living water and wiping away all our tears.

In our time, Christianity has been distorted into somehow believing the impossible. That can be another kind of nihilism. Instead I'm much more interested in experiencing and moving into the possible. One ancient culture after another tells us is that we are not alone, we are part of a web of existence that comes long before us and will continue long after us, and that we can live our lives sustained and strengthened by this web.

Christianity upholds this reality in its vision of the communion of the Saints, a vision so powerful that even what is most strange, most not us, death and the dead, are contained within a realm of grace which can sustain us, sing to us, comfort us, give us hope, give us wisdom, give us guidance, if we will let go of the perverse egotism that says it is all about us, and that if we're going to die, than nothing else matters.

My mother is one of those in whom the ancient traditions have survived. She'll be eighty-eight in February. I think I've mentioned before how, many years ago, when I brought to her my terrible fears that our world might destroy itself through nuclear holocaust she said yes-- she thought that was possible --maybe even likely. Well doesn't the prospect of that terrify you? "Yes, it is frightening, but mainly I feel really sad because I so value and love this human experiment". Her affirmation and love for humanity, even if we destroy ourselves, remains such a comfort to me.

More recently, as I've seen her diminishing, I asked her how she's feeling about the prospect of dying. She replied, "Yes. It does seem very strange, hard to imagine, but I guess I wouldn't want to miss it because dying seems such a basic part of the human experience."

In a world where so many of our thinkers have retreated from grappling with the big issues by retreated into small specialties cut off from any broader dialogue--Christianity says that Jesus' overcoming death was only the beginning, that resurrection is a process that one day will be all in all, and that between now and that day we can experience, at least occasionally, the incredible joy, light, sustenance, of the communion of the saints, those living and those who have died, who gathered together around the throne of the lamb sing a song of blessing and thanksgiving, proclaiming resurrection, even here, even now.