

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour/St. Stephens
All Saints' Sunday
November 4, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, on All Saints' Sunday we find our attention turned toward of all things the afterlife.

Yes, on this All Saints' Sunday, we find our focus drawn to that which comes after this human existence here on earth.

Now, another name for the afterlife is "heaven."

While some call the afterlife "eternity."

And for still others, they prefer to call the afterlife "paradise."

Personally, my preferred word for the afterlife is the "hereafter," because it reminds me also of when sometimes I walk into the kitchen and I forget what I was looking for, and I say to myself, "What am I hereafter?"

That is a little joke for your listening pleasure.

But, yes, today on All Saints' Sunday we direct our attention to the afterlife. And, it would seem most appropriate that we celebrate All Saints' Day on November 1st and All Saints' Sunday on the first Sunday in November, because in many ways this time of year lends itself to thinking about our mortality.

We are experiencing less and less daylight at this time of year.

And the trees are dropping their leaves in preparation for the winter season.

The harvest is being taken in, and the landscape is browning.

The sky is often gray and even rainy.

It just feels like nature all around us is pondering its own transience, its own impermanence, its own passing.

And so, this time of year lends itself to think about our own mortality.

So, having All Saints' Sunday in November does seem to make sense.

But, Friends, this was not always the case.

There was a time when All Saints' Day was celebrated on May 13, in the middle of spring.

Yes, All Saints' Day was first established on May 13 by Pope Boniface IV back in the year 609 A.D.

It was only later changed to the current date of November 1 by Pope Gregory III during his reign in 731-741 A.D., when he dedicated a chapel in Rome's St. Peter's Basilica in honor of all saints.

But we see the date of All Saints was not changed so as to coincide with what was going on in nature.

Even so, I find it fitting that All Saints falls when it does in the year, as it certainly suits the changes in nature.

PAUSE

And so, as we think of our mortality, and we ponder then the afterlife, it is interesting to note the different perspectives out there of what that afterlife might look like.

Popular culture has often depicted a heaven with angels dressed in white robes, a halo above each head.

And the angels are sitting on clouds, each with a harp in front of them which they are playing.

And there is a gate, the entranceway into heaven, where people are lined up hoping to gain admittance, almost like some crowd waiting to get into a sporting event or concert at a stadium.

And there at the gate St. Peter stands with the Book of Life in hand, deciding who gets in and who doesn't get in.

This is the image that has come down to us from popular culture.

But it doesn't really tell us exactly what heaven is like, or what it is we do for all eternity.

Back in seminary, I remember being taught that the idea of a spirit that leaves the body to float up to heaven, which is also a popular understanding of the afterlife...

I remember being taught in seminary that this spiritual afterlife was not Biblical.

This was not Christianity's understanding of what happened after death.

No, from the very dawn of Christianity, Christianity has always been pretty clear in its belief in the resurrection of the body.

And so, we were taught in seminary there are two things going on at the time of one's death.

There is the grieving and mourning we experience because we still have our being and existence on this timeline, and we missed our loved one.

But at the same time, the deceased is at another point on the timeline, having been raised with Jesus on that future last day, because the deceased has had no concept of time passing.

Kind of like in sleep, we don't comprehend in death the passing of time in the same way.

For the deceased, it is as if no time has passed from the time of death to the day when all will be raised in Christ.

And so in truth, each person dies at different points along the historical timeline, but we are all raised together in an instant, which happens on the last day, the day of Jesus Christ.

It is only then that we still mourn our loved ones because we still are back here on the timeline.

It is kind of difficult to wrap our minds around that time leap.

Even so, we CAN and SHOULD speak of our deceased loved ones as now with God, even though our jump to the last day has not happened yet for us.

Anyway, that was what had been explained to us as seminarians regarding the afterlife.

And I don't know if that is helpful or not, or maybe I have just muddied the waters for you.

It is portably easier to see with a diagram, with arrows and maybe some calculus equations to help explain.

But what then is eternity in heaven like?

Well, as we read in our text from Revelation, we see that one Biblical image of heaven is that of an eternal worship service.

It says in Revelation 7:15, referring to those robed in white, referring to the saints of God, "For this reason THEY are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple."

So, eternity is described here anyway as an eternal worship service.

And I often wonder if for many, particularly those who may not find worship to be their cup of tea...

I often wonder if for many, this depiction of eternity in heaven as one long worship service, sounds more like the other place.

"You mean, heaven is going to be one-long-worship-service?"

And there will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But we have to imagine that the music of this heavenly worship will be unlike any glorious music we have ever heard.

And we have to imagine that the communion meal will be a banquet unlike any banquet we have ever known.

And we have to imagine that the celebration will be unlike we have ever experienced.

PAUSE

But all this aside...

All this speculation about what happens when we die, and what eternity in heaven is like, aside.

What we acknowledge this day more than anything is the "communion of saints."

And this is one of the great mysteries of God, this communion of saints.

Aside from life after death, and the resurrection from the dead...

Aside from eternity in heaven and the worship of God for all our days...

Aside from these things, the communion of saints in itself is a great, great mystery of God.

Because what we acknowledge this day, and every time we come together for worship, what we acknowledge is that our gathering is not just the gathering of saints here in this place, but it is the gathering of all the saints of every time and place.

The concept of All Saints' is that the saints who have gone before us, (including Lauralee Kunz, Eva Kunz, Ed Digon, Bob Lisse) still gather with us.

The words in our service speak to this truth.

In portion of the liturgy called The Great Thanksgiving, we say, "It is indeed right, our duty, and our joy, that we should at all times and all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty God, through our Savior Jesus Christ; who on this day overcame death and the grave, and by his glorious resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life. And so, WITH ALL THE CHOIRS OF ANGELS, WITH THE CHURCH ON EARTH AND THE HOSTS OF HEAVEN, we praise your name and join their unending hymn.

Did we hear that?

With all the choirs of angels, with the church on earth AND the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn.

Our voices in worship are joined with the voices of the saints in heaven.

And furthermore, we speak of our communion meal as a "foretaste" of the feast to come, which is even now going on in heaven.

So, in essence, our worship service is a portal, a gateway between heaven and earth, and the "communion of saints" is the collection of worshippers here and in heaven.

That is a great mystery, but one that gives us great hope and reassurance.

The people we have loved, and whom had died, are never far from us.

And this concept of the communion of saints reminds us that to be a Christian is to be part of a group.

In essence, we can't really be a faithful Christian outside of community.

In this respect, Christianity is analogous to bee hive.

Take a single bee and isolate from the hive, give it all the water and nutrients that bee needs, and still that bee will not survive.

The bee needs the hive, just like a Christian needs the communion of saints.

PAUSE

Finally, then, on this All Saints' Sunday, I want to read to us again our Gospel reading.

But I read the translation of the text as it appears in what is called *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

This is the Bible in Contemporary Language.

Indeed this translation is unique and powerful, and it is a description of what I think the saintly life looks like.

We talked about the community of saints, and the importance for a Christians to be a part of that community.

Now, I also want to provide what is at least one description of the saintly life.

A reading then of Matthew 5:1-12, from *The Message*.

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside.

Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him.

Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions.

This is what he said.

(And this is what I would have us pay close attention to.)

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you (less of our agenda, less of our arrogance) then there is more of God and his rule.”

“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.”

“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.”

“You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.”

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full’ C-A-R-E-F-U-L-L as in ‘full of care’...at the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you’ll find yourselves cared for.”

“You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.”

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.”

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.”

“Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

And know that you are in good company. For each of you are among the saints in light.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.