

Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
November 3, 2024, All Saints Sunday
Revelation 21:1-6a, *A Very Long Table*

All Saints Sunday is, by my estimation, the most solemn Sunday of the year. Our somber services are generally on other days of the week - Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday. Sundays, on the other hand, resonate with the echoes of resurrection. Each one is a little Easter - even Sundays in the season of Lent are not counted among the forty days of repentance and sacrifice. All Saints alone is funereal in spirit. Many churches call this day Memorial Sunday, and that works, too - just as a typical Sunday is a little Easter, Memorial Sunday is a little Memorial.

Only that's not quite right. On all All Saints Sunday we attend an enormous Memorial, one held not in the memory of a single dearly departed soul, but every single dearly departed soul that ever lived. The All Saints sermon is a eulogy for all the saints, who from their labors rest. When I open my United Church of Christ book of worship at the beginning of a Funeral, I utter some beautiful words: "Friends, we gather in the protective shelter of God's healing love. We are free to pour out our grief, release our anger, face our emptiness, and know that God cares. We gather here as God's people, conscious of others who have died and of the frailty of our own existence on earth. We come to comfort and to support one another in our common loss. We gather to hear God's word of hope and move us to offer God our praise. We gather to commend to God with thanksgiving the life of our loved one, as we celebrate the good news of Christ's resurrection. For whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Christ who is Lord, both of the dead and of the living."

Did you catch it? Even in the midst of our mourning, we are called to speak some remarkably joyous words: Hope. Praise. Celebrate. And the most joyous word of all: resurrection. Even solemn funerals resonate with the echoes of resurrection. Only that's not quite right. *Especially* solemn funerals resonate with the echoes of resurrection. All Saints is as Eastery as Easter itself. For whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Christ who is Lord, both of the dead and of the living. The painting on display and printed on the cover of your bulletins today is called the New Jerusalem. It was painted by the late Sister George Helen, a nun who lived and died in my old neighborhood. I used to walk to her convent for appointments with my spiritual director. I was the first in line when they announced that they were selling some of the art that had adorned the hallways. This one had always stopped me in my tracks. The scene it depicts is the very one described by John of Patmos in our reading today from the book of Revelation.

Mainline Christians don't spend a lot of time in Revelation, and we're not the first Christians to avoid it. The early church debated whether it should really be included in the Bible. When I was a spitfire seminarian, I vehemently argued that it was too violent to preach. It is wild and wooly and frequently misinterpreted in dangerous ways. People constantly try to take the book of Revelation literally, as if it is a book of predictions just waiting to be parsed. Reading Revelation literally totally misses the point.

Reading Revelation literally is like trying to find the square root of a sonnet or applying the principles of calculus to a sonata.

John of Patmos isn't a clairvoyant forecasting the future; he's a composer writing a song of heartbreaking lamentation and defiant hope. To a church in crisis, a people

who are crushed under the heel of a powerful persecutor, he proclaims: death does not have the final word. He says Christ is Lord of the dead and of the living.

He promises the story is not over yet, and when it is, our suffering will not only be vindicated; our every sorrow will be undone.

Even our grief.

As John of Patmos and Sister Helen George use their holy imaginations, they envision a great multitude of people who are no longer susceptible to hunger or thirst. They are no longer in need of handkerchiefs to wipe sweat from their brows or tears from their cheeks. Everything that was broken is restored; everything that was lost is found. The whole of Creation joins in singing praises to the Creator. Meanwhile, the Creator draws so near, one translation of the text says that “God will move into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women.” So close you could walk there.

I recently read about a priest named Thomas who asked his congregation to use their holy imaginations when they gathered around the table for the Lord’s Supper. He invited people to “imagine the communion table stretching on for miles, to remind us that when we take Communion, we mysteriously feast with all those who are in Christ. In the Eucharist we commune with Dorothy Day and Saint Augustine, the apostle Paul and Billy Graham, Flannery O’Connor and my own grandmother. [And] one day we will all feast together, in the flesh, with Christ himself.”

That bears repeating, as we begin to prepare our hearts and minds to approach that table ourselves: *one day we will all feast together, in the flesh, with Christ himself.*

I love the image of a communion table that stretches on for miles. As far as the eye can see. It’s easy to forget that when we partake in the body and blood of Christ, we

are not merely in Communion with our siblings seated alongside us in the pews, or with us via livestream. We are not merely in Communion with all the other Christians around the world, as we celebrated during World Communion Sunday last month. On All Saints, we remember that we are in Communion with the Communion of the Saints. We are one in the spirit with Christians of all times, and all places. That is a really long table.

The Lord's Supper is a meal of remembrance, a time to recall the night that Jesus broke bread with his friends before his death. But the Lord's Supper is also a foretaste of the day when Jesus will break bread with his friends after death itself is vanquished - for all, and forever.

So yes: for now, there is grief. For now, there are tears, and the tolling of too many bells. For now, All Saints is a solemn affair. But do not lose heart; do not grieve as those without hope. Listen for the joy thrumming beneath the sound of sorrow; look for the love that will not let us go.

Eat the bread of heaven, and drink the cup of forgiveness, and trust that while the triumph song is yet distant, the saints are already singing. The table is already set. The neighborhood is already redeemed. Creation is already restored. Already, but not yet. Thanks be to God.