A.M.D.G. All Saints Day – B Text: Revelation 7: 9-17

 November 1, 2015

There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’  And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.  They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;  for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

**For All The Saints**

Today is All Saints Day in the Christian Church. We, in the United Church, don’t tend to focus as much attention on All Saints Day as do some of our Christian sisters and brothers like the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans. But as it falls on a Sunday this year, I thought it would be good to talk a bit about the meaning behind this special day – and to hear again the important messages that All Saints Day proclaims.

The Christian Church has widely observed the Festival of All Saints since around the year 600 AD. – although stories of Christian martyrs in the faith have been circulating since the days of the Early Church – shortly after Jesus’ death. The account of the stoning of Stephen in the book of Acts would be one example. But there are many – many – stories of the saints through the ages.

As I was preparing for this morning, one story that piqued my interest in particular was that of St. Denis – who is formally known as Saint Denis of Paris. But after reading his story – I think he should be called the Patron Saint of Preachers! You see, back in the 3rd century, Denis was tasked with converting people throughout Gaul – an area encompassing most of West Europe - which included modern day France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of Italy and the Netherlands. In fact, he was doing such a good job of it, he really annoyed the local pagans. So to stop Denis from converting any more of their followers they beheaded him.

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Now beheading tends to put an end to most people’s ambitions - but according to legend, Denis just picked up his head and kept on preaching - presumably after a hilarious slapstick routine where his decapitated body stumbled around the execution grounds in search of its head. He supposedly then marched and preached a sermon for six miles before finally dropping dead - although we have to wonder how effective his last attempt at conversion was. I’m sure if *we* saw a headless guy walking towards us - we’d be too busy fleeing in terror to give his religious beliefs any serious thought, regardless of how convincing his arguments were! Oh - and as proof that God has a sense of irony - Denis is the patron saint of people suffering from headaches. We can only assume he responds to the prayers of headache suffers by appearing in a vision and telling them to suck it up because they totally don’t know what real head pain is like!

Many of the stories of the saints and the art that depicts them – portray them – like Saint Denis - in difficult and often grisly circumstances. But there are also many who were not only joyful but had terrific senses of humor. Stories about the overt humor of the saints reach as far back as the early Roman martyrs -- that is, from the very earliest days of the church. In the third century, St. Lawrence, who was burned to death on a grill, over hot coals, called out to his executioners, "*This side is done. Turn me over and have a bite.*" And in the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, puckishly prayed, "*Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet."* And saintly humor continues up until modern times. Perhaps the most well-known contemporary example is John XXIII - who served as pope from 1958 to 1963. His most famous joke came when a journalist innocently asked him, "*Your Holiness, how many people work in the Vatican*?" Pope John paused, thought it over, and said, "*About half of them*."

Let me ask you - what do ***you*** think of when you hear the term ‘saint’?

Often, when we think of saints – we think of those who have earned entrance into something like a Christian Hall Of Fame – those who have reached a higher level of Christian perfection. But this is not, in fact, a biblical perspective. The New Testament never uses terms to refer to a special Hall of Fame group of Christians. The New Testament always uses the word ‘saint’ to refer to the whole church and every believer.

Take for example, St. Paul’s letter to the church at Rome …. He begins: *“To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (1:7) And he addresses his 2 letters to the church at Corinth by writing, *“To the church of God that is in Corinth – to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus – called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Sainthood, for Paul was not a status to be earned – but a gift of grace to be claimed by everyone who is a follower of Jesus.

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There is a particular church in Willmar, Minnesota that has taken this promise to heart – and actually built it into their building. The name of the church is Vinjy Lutheran – named for saints in the Scandinavian tongue of the founders.

The church is built in the round. And at the time of its building, the congregation commissioned a well-known Minnesotan sculptor to carve a wooden relief into the interior walls of the church. He carved two rows in the round above the pews encircling the entire congregation. The first row quotes a passage from the book of Hebrews, chapter 12 – referring to the saints as a cloud of witnesses. It reads – starting in the front and circling round: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”* At that point – when that verse from Hebrews is finished – the circle of the text is complete and unbroken.

Then – beneath that row of scripture – is another row of text that contains the names of saints – the saints who were chosen and beloved and graced by God – not because they ***earned*** sainthood but because God bestowed on imperfect, sinful people – God’s grace. It starts with Adam and Eve - and then Abraham and Sarah – and then it continues through the Hebrew Scriptures. Halfway around – the name of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is carved into the wall – and then it moves through the New Testament and the names of the saints from church history – until it finally finishes in the 20th Century with the name of the Second World War Era, German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

But that circle of names isn’t complete. There is a gap – a blank spot that keeps the circle open. And in that empty spot – there is just enough room for a couple more words. The designers of the church intended that we would know that there’s just enough room for two more names. Can you guess what they are? *You and Me*. The designers of that church wanted you and me to know the biblical promise that we, too, are – by the grace of God – saints. Our names are virtually added to those of the saints through the ages. And when that happens – the circle becomes unbroken.

I love the vision of those founders of Vinjy Lutheran Church. I love the image of the ‘cloud of witnesses’ or the ‘Communion of Saints’ surrounding and holding us close in spirit. All those through the ages who have tried to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – saints through the ages – including those ***we*** have known and loved in ***our*** lifetimes – and who are with us still in our hearts and memories. I have often – over the years I’ve been here at West Point Grey – sat alone in the sanctuary and felt the presence of those who have given so faithfully of themselves over the years -permeating the walls and space in *this* place. And it has given me a sense of peace and encouragement along the way.

And I love to think that we, too – stand in that long line of saints through the ages – called and chosen by God to be God’s hands and feet to the world of ***our*** day. Not perfect by any means – not even extraordinary most of the time – but saints none the less – trying our best to follow in the footsteps of Christ as best we can.

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All God asks of any of us is that we live into the potential with which we are created as a one-of-a-kind, never-to-be-repeated human being – and as the preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “*to love as you are loved, to throw your arms around the world, and to shine like the sun.”*

And we don’t have to do it alone, either. We have all this company – all the saints sitting right here – whom we can see for ourselves – all you’se guys! - as well as all the ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have gone on before – egging us on, and surrounding us with love and encouragement. Because we are a part of them – and they are a part of us – in this grand enterprise of faith to which God calls us.

Thanks be to God. Amen