

A Blessed Life

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
All Saints Sunday – November 1, 2020

On All Saints Sunday, the church around the world gathers together to remind ourselves that we are part of what the creed calls the *communion of saints*. We are part of an inclusive, global fellowship that stretches across space and time, across and beyond every border, where our shared ultimate allegiance is not to any empire or nation-state, but to Jesus Christ our King. This is the fellowship that is envisioned in Revelation 7, the first text that Linda read for us today: “After this I looked, and 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.”

This fellowship of the King, this innumerable, diverse, beautiful assembly, according to verse 14, is made of those who have “come out of the great ordeal,” those who have been brought through the trials and temptations and sufferings of the world. When the text says that they have ‘come out’ of the ordeal, that is a nod to the work that God has been doing ever since the Exodus, leading people out of bondage, setting people free. And as in the Exodus from Egypt, this great fellowship has been brought out through the blood of a Lamb. In the first Exodus, it was the blood of a Lamb that protected the Hebrew slaves in the Passover; here the blood of the Lamb of God, the crucified Christ, the death and resurrection of Jesus has washed their robes and undone all the powers of death.

We are part of that great fellowship, that great communion of saints, across every dividing line of tribe, nation, language, ideology, race, political party, and any of the other human constructs that we cherish so much. This is a rather odd text, and All Saints Sunday is a rather odd celebration, for the Sunday of election week, in which there is so much energy, and so much anxiety, being poured into the elections in this country. And we remember that, in our Reformed tradition of faith, participating in the political process is not just a civic responsibility, it is a religious responsibility. Our tradition encourages people to vote, to advocate, to run for office, to get involved for the common good and for the love of neighbor. God’s sovereign Spirit works through all things, including our messy political process.

But it is also true that Jesus and his cross summon us to a different way than the ways of the world, to a *politics of love*, to an engagement with our neighbor that – as we have suggested before – has two key foci on the neighborly, horizontal plane of our

faith: love for the vulnerable poor (those who are often referred to in biblical idiom as the 'widow, the orphan, and the stranger') and love for the enemy and the opponent. When Jesus says "you will always have the poor with you," he is assuming that his followers will always be living close to the poor, so that they can seek their well-being. And when Jesus tells his disciples to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," he is asking his students to learn from him, to follow him as he engaged those who opposed him, not merely with tolerance or resignation, but with open, broken-hearted love for them.

This calling of the church – love for the vulnerable and love for the opponent – is going to be very important in the days to come. It is not news that we are living through a time of intense polarization and animosity. And yet, it remains the case that we will get through this – get through these days – *together*.

In this, as in other serious relationships, such as a marriage, we may say that our great work is two-fold: (1) to speak our own minds as clearly and as nonthreateningly as possible; and (2) to listen to the voices of others, as openly and nondefensively as possible. To be honest and up-front about our own convictions, and to listen for understanding to the convictions of others. It can be hard for a lot of us to do either one of these very well. When we articulate our own convictions, we can end up doing it anxiously and in a threatening way; and when we listen to the convictions of others, we can end up doing that anxiously as well, and with brittle defensiveness. It's tough work. In the weeks to come, following the election, the Session at Lewinsville has affirmed an initiative of the Faith and Public Policy Committee to gather folks from the congregation, on Zoom, for a series of events sponsored by Braver Angels called "With Malice Towards None." The first of these will be on Saturday, November 21, and will be separate gatherings for (a) those who are pleased with the outcome of the election and (b) for those who are distressed by the outcome of the election, to process how it's going. Then there will be a follow-up event later in January for the groups to meet together, with an eye towards learning and understanding each other, as we seek to live and work together. More information will be coming about this series, and we encourage you to participate.

Loving the poor and loving the opponent were core aspects of the way of discipleship in Jesus' day. They are core aspects of our time now, before the election. And they will be core aspects after the election. Lewinsville's purpose continues to be to 'love and serve God by responding to human need.' It remains my conviction that when we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, on his cross, and on the well-being of the poor and vulnerable, we will come out where we need to as a church. We will undoubtedly disagree about exactly what those things mean and how to do them, but they will help us to be asking the right questions.

On All Saints Sunday, then, we remember those from our congregation who have died during this past year, who served faithfully, joyfully, with humor and compassion

and commitment, alongside of us and in front of us: Bob Alden, Alice Johnston, Hazel (Billie) Hiemstra, Duane McKenna, Betty Palmer, Sylvia Van Voorthuizen, Michael Werner. Each of you may also be remembering others who have died, in the last year and in years past. I know I am. Many of these losses are still fresh and raw. The grief that we feel over these losses is a testimony to the impact these saints have had on us, and the love that we have had for them. We dare not try to shut down our hearts, so that we will not have to feel the grief. For God is present in our grief, and God is able to use our grief, in some mysterious way, for our own healing and for the healing of the nations.

That is the paradoxical power and beauty of God's blessing. God's blessing is not about making things come out the way we want. God's blessing is about the redemption and healing of the world, leading thirsty sheep to the springs of the water of life, wiping away the tears from the eyes of those who are weeping with grief, comforting those who mourn, filling those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, giving mercy, providing strength to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and *leading us deeper and deeper into a life of humility and love.*

Now that may not be what the world has in mind, when the world thinks of 'a blessed life.' The world may assume that being blessed means being number one and having more toys than anyone else. But Jesus is after a much bigger purpose than that. Jesus is on a mission to heal the nations, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to make all things and all people new. And you and I get to be part of that mission. To God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.