

For All the Saints

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
November 1, 2015
Revelation 21:1-6a and John 11:32-44

In the spirit of All Saints Day, and in grateful memory of Third Church members who have died this past year, I would invite all who are able to stand, and let us join together, first in silence and then with one voice in prayer.

Let us pray...Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of your son, Christ our Lord. Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared. Through Jesus Christ our savior we pray. Amen.

The Rev. William W. Young

We now remember...

Nancy Mayne

Jane Feidler

Winona F. Northup

Georgia Gosnell

Robert W. Bright

Charlotte Hayford

Anne Steele Young

William G. von Berg

Alice B. Ritter

Alan Cruikshank

George H. Greer

Ellen Wilson Marple

Taylor Keller

C. Joseph Wright

William Bernet Leist

Calvin S. Garber

Elizabeth H. Chase

Harry V. Thompson

Eleanor B. Evans

Frances P. Cruikshank

Thelma Proper

William B. Hale

Robert C. Stowell

Lucy M. White

This past June I attended my college reunion, having missed the previous several. I had a surprisingly good time, connecting and reconnecting, reminiscing about what was a very happy time in my life and development. We did something in the midst of the revelry that touched me deeply, and continues so to do. We planted a tree. We planted a tree in memory of classmates who had died since our graduation. We planted a tree, and then, as we just did, observed a moment of silence. Then, as we just did, we read the list of names. It was a poignant moment, a list longer than I expected, longer than it might have been. Cancer. Car accidents. Other causes. I recognized most of the names – we are a relatively small college.

After we planted the tree, and read the list, I was privileged to offer a prayer. I wrote it earlier in the day as we were listening to a pitch from the fundraising office. “Blessed are you, O God,” I prayed, “ruler of the universe. Blessed is your world which you created and called good. From you comes every good gift. We thank you for this time of union and reunion. With grateful hearts we come here to connect and reconnect. Those grateful hearts also carry with them a certain heaviness for those now gone from us. We remember our colleagues and friends, for all they meant and continue to mean. We lift up those who continue to mourn them. Like this tree, their legacies and memories will continue to flourish – in the lives of those they loved and who loved them, in the life of this place. May this tree dedicated today reflect your constancy through every season, life and death, across the generations, providing beauty and comfort, in memory of those we remember and miss. We pray with a deep spirit of gratitude and in your holy name. Amen.”

Following the reading and the silence and the prayer, a bagpiper played “Amazing Grace,” and then the revelry continued. Someone later told me that they liked my speech; I smiled and thanked them. The tree will continue to grow and the list of names will continue to lengthen, and we will be unbound from the power of death, and God will wipe tears from our eyes.

A Kenyan impression. Kenyan worship, at least what we experienced, is a fascinating mashup of Scottish and American influences with a distinctive African flavor. They sing 15 to 20 minutes of praise music in English and Swahili, followed by traditional hymns, also in English and Swahili. This past Sunday at the Baraka Church, the offshoot of the “mother” church, we sang one such hymn. The building itself is a kind of Quonset hut, with a stone and dirt floor. It was hot and humid. Here is what we sang – in English and Swahili, accompanied by thumping electronic keyboard and our own Susie Kieran on the oboe – “Holy, holy, holy, all the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns upon the glassy sea.”

And for a whole number of reasons, sleep deprivation, I am sure, but also emotional and spiritual, tears began rolling down my cheek. It was more than unexpected; “all the saints adore

thee, casting down their golden crowns upon the glassy sea....” And I clung fast to the promise that we will be unbound from the power of death, and that God will wipe those tears, and every tear, from our eyes.

Imagine yourself imprisoned, for your faith, not many years following Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. As you are imprisoned, you are given a gift by the Spirit, the vision of an alternative reality, not only for the future, but for the very present. We are intimidated by the Book of Revelation, but we would be well served to think of it as a powerfully imaginative interpretation of Easter, of the promise of resurrection faith, not later, but now, and God with us here, and not somewhere else, far away. That is what incarnation means; God with us now. Resurrection here and resurrection now, for us, for all who have gone before us, for all who will follow us.

Strip away the confounding imagery and the large-scale drama and you have one man reminding us what Jesus reminded Lazarus – that death no longer has the final word, that we are unbound from death’s death grip. So that every time I sit down with a family to plan a funeral or memorial service, and they say they want a celebration (really meaning that they want to try to subvert grief or avoid sadness), I can guarantee them that it will be – regardless of the human circumstances – it *will* be a celebration of the promise of new life.

Listen to this testimony from a man imprisoned for his faith, its expansive imagination, its hope and truth and power. God dwells with us. Death will be no more. God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

We grieve on a day like this, All Saints, as we remember, reading these names with a quivering voice and a poignant calculus of grief and gladness. We remember all those we carry in our hearts, friends, partners and spouses, mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers, children. But we do not grieve as those without hope. We hope in this unbinding God, this tear-wiping God.

Beverly Gaventa writes that as much as the Book of Revelation is inaccessible to us, grief certainly is. “The promise that God’s future,” she writes, “will include an end to grief is a promise Christians can understand and by which they can be sustained. Here the vision comes to the doorstep.” (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, page 611)

A second Kenyan impression. There is a room in the Kihumo Parish building where the Session meets. Session meetings are formal, and happen in a formal space. Encircling the room, high on the walls, are photographs. There are photographs of elders over the years, of different groundbreaking ceremonies and other celebrations. Included is a striking photograph of the Kikuyu chief, the leader of the tribe of Kenyans represented in our partner congregation, who identified the land on which the church was built, in full tribal dress. Included is another striking

photograph, this one of one of the first indigenous Kenyans ordained as a Presbyterian minister in Kenya by the Church of Scotland, in the 1920's. He is dressed very much as I am right now.

I think of those two men, and all of those women and men, circling that room, offering silent and faithful witness not only to the proceedings of a session meeting, but all of the faithfulness represented in any gathering. I think of photographs that would encircle our meetings, images of those now gone from us, including the names we've read, and the names we read every All Saints Day, whose silent and faithful witness continues to cheer us on and inspire our own season of faithfulness. And I think of my own, and perhaps you to do the same, photographs circling our imaginations and stories and hearts, those faces, their silent and faithful witness, even now, as we seek to live each day in hope and joy. All those faces. All those names. All those saints.

And I think of that tree, on a small campus in the middle of Ohio farmland, growing imperceptibly but constantly. At some point, in some future reunion, my name will be added to that list and be read and prayed over, and a piper will pipe "Amazing Grace." At some point my name will appear in this bulletin, and someone following me will be honored to read a new list of names. That feels today not morbid or maudlin, but hopeful, because I believe in my soul that the God to whom I belong in life I belong in death, and nothing, not even death, will ever be able to separate me from that love, a love that unbinds, that wipes tears away now, that welcomes us into indescribable joy.

O blessed communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.