

Being Gathered Together (All Saints)

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Third Presbyterian Church
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2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Words cannot describe how awesome the East Avenue Grocery Run is. And yesterday was just that – awesome. Great weather, nearly 1200 participants, 150 volunteers, a phenomenal organizing team headed up by Ellen Rye and Jenny Hutkowski, all working to help address the challenge of hunger in our community. \$41,000 was raised to support hunger programs in our community, including helping to underwrite our Third Church hunger ministry. \$41,000! Thank you, all, for your leadership and participation and enthusiastic commitment. It was a great, great day.

Tuesday is Election Day. Many pundits are calling it the most consequential election of our time. I don't know about that, but I do know that it is important. And I also know in my own spirit and from many, many conversations, that it has caused an almost unprecedented level of personal, cultural and political anxiety. For the last several Sundays we have explored the word "vision" – God's and ours and how both get played out in the world. An election is just such a moment when that can happen. So pray. Examine your conscience. And vote, both as an act of faith and an act of citizenship.

This morning I would invite you as you are able please to stand. I will read the names of Third Church members who have died in the past year and then might we together join in the prayer of remembrance:

Shirley Kessler, Edna Harter, Margaret Winters, Gertrude Beyer, Ellen Van Ocker, Jean Hart, Thomas Bracken, Homer Marple, Evelyn Roland, Janice Northrup, Erin Humphrey, Emily "Ammy" LaBudde, Olive "Brownie" Hoffman, Louise Geiser, Mary Lou Branch, Mary Garber, Joyce Wunderlich, Elizabeth Montello...

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.

I believe in the communion of saints.

- A beloved, young Cuban pitcher for the Miami Marlins, Jose Fernandez, died in a boating accident. He was 24 and immortal, until he was not. His teammates all wore his jersey as the hearse inched by the ballpark, a lone trumpeter playing a mournful “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” The players, many experiencing death for the first time, touched the hearse and would not let it move in the face of their prayers and their weeping.
- When the great golfer Arnold Palmer died that same week, the Ryder Cup team placed his golf bag at the first tee as they began their tournament, a silent token of respect and affection.
- A young punter for the University of Nebraska, Nick Foltz, died in a car accident this summer. Each Saturday the Cornhusker’s opponents present a memorial tribute to the team, and to Nick’s parents, as the Buckeyes did yesterday.
- Countless Cubs fans, children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, visited gravesites of loved ones on Wednesday morning to share the nearly impossible news of the end of a 108 year drought. I, on the other hand, will tell my parents when I visit their grave that the Indians lost yet again!
- And how many will visit Susan B. Anthony’s gravesite Tuesday, grandmothers and granddaughters, mothers and sisters, to place an “I voted” sticker on a simple gravestone and to whisper, softly, “thank you.”

What does it mean to say, as we do in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the communion of saints.” It means all of that, and so much more.

Recently a college student came to the office and I happened to be downstairs. She was writing a comparative religion paper and wanted to talk to someone. I said I would be glad to do it. I wonder if later she regretted her timing! She said she was Roman Catholic, and that her first question was about the differences between the Catholic faith and the Presbyterian faith. I replied that Catholicism and Protestantism, of which we Presbyterians are a part, were not two faiths, but two branches of the same faith, Christianity, two tributaries of the same river. We share most things, and on the most major things – Jesus, the Bible – there were no differences.

Saints is a second order difference, though not an unimportant one. We expressed early skepticism in setting holy people apart, largely, then, because there was deemed to be lack of biblical warrant for it. Our tradition has embraced the priesthood of all believers, that none are

more special, or holy, than any others. We've believed that all are saints, even when they don't always act saintly. And we pray to God, not to individual saints.

We all do believe, however, that the saints pray for us. We have called it in our tradition "the perseverance of the saints."

I believe in the communion of saints. What does it mean to believe that? It has much to do with what we believe about life and death, about what happens when we die, that the end of this earthly life is not the end of our journey, that however it happens, we are received into God's eternal and loving care and live in eternal relationship with God, the place Jesus goes to prepare.

"Life everlasting," the creed calls it. We believe that, and we believe that those who have gone before us – by God's sovereign grace and in God's infinite love – dwell there, received in love by God. The communion of saints. And that it has power, not mystical, magical power, but spiritual power to help us live our lives now, until we experience what a lovely prayer calls "glad reunion" with them.

Hebrews calls them the "great cloud of witnesses." I like to think of them as my balcony people, those sitting in the balcony watching over us, cheering us on. Teachers and coaches and ministers and beloved family members. Their presence is with us. Look around this room and notice the plaques on the walls and pews. Third Church's balcony people, the saints cheering us on here, encouraging us, comforting us, provoking us. I believe in that because I have experienced it.

We are living in extraordinary times in so many ways, and we are living in extraordinary times as we think about death and dying and the saints. I spoke a bit ago at the Jewish Federation on changing practices in Christianity. My bottom line, I said, is that when once there were very prescribed rules, the rule now is that there are no rules. Time would be that a loved one died, a service would be held 3 or 4 days later at which everyone would drop everything to attend and a burial would immediately following. That rarely happens anymore, due to the expansion of the practice of cremation, travel schedules, cultural expectations. It is not good or bad, mind you, but it is different, and it underscores how important rituals and words can be when things are shifting so much.

We cling to rituals and we cling to words. And we cling to one another as we cling to the promises of our faith. Rituals and words matter only when we remember what undergirds them. We find strength in community as we face grief because it is God who supports us at the deepest level.

Paul writes to the Thessalonian church about the community being gathered together. I can easily envision that gathering. Like I can easily envision gatherings in earlier generations in this place. We worshipped differently. Different attire, hymns, tone, much longer sermons. Or earlier iterations of the meetings we have now. How will we deal with this problem or that one? How will we lead in this moment or that one? So that those words, "being gathered together," continue to carry meaning, that at some point it is a continuous line and not a broken one from what has gone before us to where we are now to the church we are called to be, where our names will be the ones on the plaques and printed in the bulletin on an All Saint's Sunday, where the power of our witness now will be available to them then.

There is faithfulness and hope when we gather together. Because we believe in the communion of saints, the impact of that communion's witness on us is not limited by years or moments or even death itself. The communion of saints empowers our witness now, and because I believe it is God's intention to gather us together, how on earth can we conceive that gathering, friends on earth and friends above, being limited to this earthly plain.

For now, though, what do we do? We affirm our faith in the communion of saints by remembering, by simultaneously holding on and letting go. By taking courage and comfort from the communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses, as we seek to run with perseverance, as they did, the race that is set before us.

In the last round of cleaning out my dad's books I found this. It is called the "Book of Common Worship," and even though we Presbyterians are free to pray as we please, we have little prayer books that help us sometimes, for some Sunday morning inspiration or at occasions like weddings and funerals. I have one of my own, an updated version, dotted with candle wax and water stains from cemeteries and sweat and a few tears.

I found my dad's, which he got in the late 1950's right after his ordination. He was born left-handed but they forced him, as they did, to write right-handed, and his unique printing is throughout, highlights, words crossed out, little notations. It is well-worn and it was well-used.

Here's a prayer from it: "O Lord God, the light of the faithful, the strength of those who labor, and the repose of the blessed dead: We give thee thanks of Thy saints who have witnessed in their lives a good confession, for all the faithful departed, and for those dear to our own hearts who have entered into rest...Grant us grace so to follow their good example that we may be one with them in spirit, and, at the last, together with them, be made partakers of Thine eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.