



“Breaking Bread with the Saints”

a sermon by

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Our Scripture Reading for this afternoon comes from the book of Revelation Chapter 7: 9-17. The apostle John shares with his reader an extended vision of apocalyptic proportions that attempts to reveal part of the divine mysteries of God and the future for disciples of Christ. This passage is prefaced with an intense vision of death and destruction and judgment and a reckoning of the elect. Here begins our reading.

“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, 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 worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever 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 center 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.” Here ends our reading, this is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God, let us pray: Holy God quiet our anxious hearts and busy minds, center us this hour in you that we might be nourished by your presence and grow in our faith by your grace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Well, I am glad to see that we have all survived the election. The votes are in and our country has named George W. Bush our new president. Some of you may be thrilled, some may be considering a move to Canada. I will, in a predictable new Associate Pastor move, be keeping my opinions to myself. I think we would all agree that meeting for Worship on Wednesdays gives us a unique privilege of sorts- we may experience holy seasons from the vantage of the weekday, crack the door of our weekly routine so that the light of faith may inform our perspective on the world around us. And it is here that we may encounter some incredible tensions as well as our faith seeks to intersect, sometimes with great difficulty, with our everyday lives. Hopefully this is done with a cultivated centeredness in the Spirit, but sometimes we are left with a resulting friction as well. And here we find ourselves pressed up against another tension mid-week that we have the good fortune to process here today- two seemingly irreconcilable differences occurring back to back in two days- All Saints Day, and Election Day. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor? Greater than the leap from great taste to low carb is the most politically charged evening in 4 years and a day that many Christians reserve for reverent remembrance and communion. Politics and saints. Though it seems obscure, perhaps the timing of these days could not actually be any better- as is the case when most any two things are held in tension with one another, the juxtaposition of the two often expose the finer points of the respective parts, revealing a startling clarity.

In this case, the startling clarity in these seemingly unrelated events comes for me when the discussion turns to that of community. When we have been exposed to weeks of dialogue, analysis, pot shots, wisdom, and chatter prior to the presidential election, perhaps the most pervasive image in our minds that encompasses these times is one of fraction. Equally vociferous campaign trail groupies, waving signs, cheering crowds on both sides of the party line characterize the standard media fare of any given evening. ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘we’ and ‘they’, ‘I’ and ‘other’ litter most conversations and buttons asserting political inclinations walk virtually every hall, asserting either passive or active differentiation from those wearing different buttons, and alignment with those wearing the same. A much needed leisurely walk through downtown Asheville with my husband on a quiet Saturday morning recently was shocked into a reminder of fraction and factions when we found ourselves in the midst of a spontaneous rally of young and old alike- divided down the middle by the main street, as if the community had organized itself intuitively. For a brief moment those on one side of the street were shouting “Help is on the Way” while the other side responded “Four More Years!” Some were laughing playfully. Some were red in the face. And I was left wondering my gosh, how did we get here? But the conversation is not limited to questions of stars and stripes, but extends to virtually every element of society. Though the conversation may be a little quieter we recognize the tensions inherent in our perception of the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ both materially and spiritually. There are those who survive the company restructuring for whatever reason and there are those who don’t. There is a ‘great land’ and an ‘axis of evil’, cultural stereotypes that just can’t seem to be entirely shaken and Charlotte is left holding the ball with a recent statistic reporting that she ranks 48th out of 50 major cities in interracial trust. Watching the results roll in and red and blue states emerge, and I begin to feel downright fragmented not just within my community but within myself.

It is at this point in the conversation that the apostle John arrives on the scene in this classic All Saints Day text and offers a vision of the element of the apocalypse that we actually *want* to be a part of: “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, 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!” This is not just a pleasant breeze of perceived unity blowing here, this is a hurricane of love among those united in the act of praise- the divine leveler- because in the face of that kind of love there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is just Christ and life in him in the kingdom- with those Saints that raise their voices in praise. The defining characteristic of this chorus is nothing that can be perceived on this earth, but is rather a common experience of triumph through what John calls the great ordeal. Resisting conformity to the pressures of the world, accepting and following Christ’s ways can be an ordeal indeed- an ordeal that occasions struggle and suffering, even death, and according to John the ordeal is also God’s working out of the history of salvation in Jesus Christ. John’s church emerges triumphant in heaven, but like their Savior they have been redeemed by blood- Christ’s blood and their own struggle to faithfully honor his sacrifice often in difficult, even dangerous tension with the world around them. It is Christ’s death rather than their own merit or opinion that gives them their white robes, “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” John is speaking of those same robes worn by the victors of battle or sport in ancient Rome, but here the prize is salvation for we are all victors in Christ,

and for this reason they now worship at God's throne day and night, unified in continuous and irresistible praise, waiving palms to greet their king.

Christ received this awesome purity, the purity that one theologian says comes through costly and deliberate devotion to a better way¹ and he extends it to us. "The Lamb who gave his life's blood for others is also the Shepherd who rules from the midst of the throne." In our common humanity Christ extends to us an uncommon grace and calls us unto him not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who God has called us to be. He invites us as God's own people to a kingdom defined not by right and wrong, or by who is in and who is out according to the standard of this world for Jesus himself says "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."² On the morning after Election Day we may find ourselves acutely aware of our differences as a people of this world, but we are called as Christians to live in the spirit of the Saints Day and embrace a higher vision of our potential for community through Christ who loved us. That we might give thanks for those who have gone before us, who no longer share life on this earth with us but share a life of faith with us still, that we might daily reconnect with the notion that Christian community, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transcends temporal bounds, disregards such trivialities as whether or not the flesh is living or dead, is of one hue or another, or clothed in anything that rivals the lilies of the field because by God we are united in Christ Jesus. It is this intimacy with Christ, this living and dying with his body and rising with his spirit to new life together with Jesus that we celebrate when we break the bread and share the cup, in sacramental communion that unites us with one another, neighbor to neighbor, believer to believer. Saint to saint throughout time as one community in the kingdom of God through the living and active spirit of Jesus Christ that binds us together as those who are equally broken and have been equally redeemed. Come to the table for the feast for our spirits has been prepared. Let your faith be nourished and your hope restored by this table fellowship we share, and know that this abundance in Christ is but a foretaste of the heavenly banquet God has prepared in the kingdom we can emulate today. The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them, they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; and the Lamb will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Amen.

¹ Leander Keck, *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1998, p. 624.

² Matthew 7:21.