

“Among The Great Company”
Revelation 7:9-17
All Saints Sunday
November 3, 2019
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Revelation 7:9-17 (NRSV) The Multitude from Every Nation

⁹After 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. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And 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, ¹²singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I 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.

¹⁵For 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.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for 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.”

Just by its name, this Sunday causes us to think of people we love who aren't with us anymore.

As we named our Family of Faith's eight saints of 2019 many of us are moved to also remember the “someone else(s)” who died a long time ago, or maybe just recently.

Whenever we experienced the loss of someone we love, there is still, at least sometimes, a sense of sadness.

There are a lot of memories and we don't just "move on" from grief, we move forward with it.

As I prepared for today's service, I TOOK the opportunity to go through my files of the services of celebration we hosted here this year.

It was a time, for me, to recall the stories of their lives.

Oh, I am so thankful to have known them. I know you are too.

And importantly, we're thankful that these dear people are now worshiping, IN Heaven WITH the great heavenly throng.

I heard a Christian recording artist say recently, (I paraphrase from my recollection) "I can't find anywhere in Scripture," he said, "that my loved one is watching me from Heaven. I feel them around me and talk to them often but watching me? I think they're too busy worshiping Almighty God!"

We can't deny that life has times of sorrow. But there is joy, too.

Our stories of the people we're mourning, are where we draw on instruction and yes, insights from their pilgrimages of faith. Those people are *witnesses* – not just in how they lived their earthly lives but also as they LIVE in eternity...they *bear* testimony to us concerning Jesus Christ. Isaiah wrote:

'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows' (Isaiah 53: 4).

Our saints' stories point us to his story. And it's *his* story that enables us to bear the losses (and those aren't just deaths) of our lives.

I had to read a book by Laurence Stookey.

He died a couple of years ago but so much about the way I prepare for worship was because Rev. Stookey. He's the reason I'm inclined to always make sure our Communion "front and center" – because Holy Communion is central to everything else we do as Christians.

- Stookey is the reason I want you to have a generous bite of bread when you come to this rail in a few minutes – because **GOD IS GENEROUS!**

- And Rev. Stookey caused me to think about receiving the holy meal last – because a good hostess serves everyone else first.

Someone who is now a saint, who I never met except through his writing, shaped my ministry in fundamental ways.

In fact, though YOU probably didn't know this, Rev. Stookey's teaching has touched you, too. You don't have to look, but his name is on the Preface page of your hymnal!

He was on the Worship Resources sub-committee with this hymnal's revision and the liturgy of Baptism, as well as Holy Communion were influenced by him. He even wrote the parts of the extra verses to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"!

Rev. Larry Stookey was vital in shaping the words of liturgy that we use to praise God. And now, he's a saint, in the throne room of heaven, with our beloved family members and friends and they are all worshiping God Almighty together.

Now, not many of us can boast of having a "Rev. Stookey" in our family tree. But think, fondly and joyfully, about the things your grandparents and parents, brothers, sisters, and "siblings from another mother" taught you...things that shaped how YOU live your life...

...how you make a family-favorite recipe...or how you remember to say a prayer over the meal that recipe is filling.

How you can change a tire or check your oil in the car.

Or darn a sock. Does anyone do that anymore? We might not do it but we know how 'cause someone shared that knowledge with us.

Or how 'bout a pastor who shared the love of God with us - the first time and ever after that time. PPUMC's personal pastor/saint, Rev. Glenn, imparted a lot of life-living wisdom that has and IS preparing us for the **living** we'll be doing in the presence of our Almighty God when that time comes.

The people you've named in your hearts just now may not have been "giants" who made the headlines but they are giants of faith and they walked as disciples of Christ.

I smile when I think about a story I read about a little boy going into a church with his granddad. The church had stained glass windows with images of people in them. Granddad tried to explain that those people were saints, but before he could explain **why** they were saints, the little boy said, "I see. A saint is someone who lets the light shine through."

When we think of saints, too often the "big names" come to mind.

Good preachers like Billy Graham.

Good servants like Mother Theresa.

We get tangled up and connect the word "saint" with perfection and achievement – things that Billy or Theresa would have said they were.

But it's very interesting that the Bible doesn't say anything about saints.

Instead, like in the verses that Sally read earlier, we have these images of "a great company," "multitudes" that "no one can number."

God's Word, our Bible, tells the story of God's people.

And when we take off our rose-colored glasses we realize that they are examples of imperfect people (just like us) who were faithful (just like we're trying to be.)

They weren't saints who were perfect.

Thank God, for the wisdom to show us CLEARLY, that God's people were VERY MUCH LIKE US.

And, whether they were weathering the storms of their stupid decisions...

...or the chaos of exile (which was probably the consequence of their decisions)...

...or the torture of persecution (which was BECAUSE they were faithful)...

...these are the people, right in HERE [Bible] who remained firm in their faith, strong in their witness that God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer and that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and that he IS alive and will come again.

Amen?

Revelation tells us that "the great crowd" were those "people [who] have come out of great hardship."

Do you know anyone who has faced hardship in their lives?

In the midst of the hardship, did they keep the faith?

Did they “fight the good fight?”

Dear Ones, is that someone YOU?

Every day – keeping the faith and fighting the GOOD fight!

We remember today those who have died and who, through it all, lived a life of faith.

They faced the ups and downs of this world and always pointed to the glory of God.

Is that someone YOU?

Pointing to God?

They may not have been famous, but they faithfully and humbly offered their gifts in service to God.

They endured and their faith remained firm.

Is that YOU?

Are you firm even as you have to endure?

Over time, they chaired committees of the church.

They taught Sunday School and sang in the choir.

They raised their families (some of YOU) in the faith and guided others to be able to do the same.

Is that you?

Are you witnessing for others to know *how* to live lives of faith?

Now, our loved ones rest from their labors.

But even in their rest, their living faith remains, as they are part of the that great company of heaven; standing around the throne in worship, singing and praising God day and night.

The writer of Hebrews said this:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith....” (Heb. 12:1-2)

Dear Ones, we’re not perfect.

We’re probably not (or weren’t) standouts in our vocations.

We deal with doubt.

And hardship – though that may manifest itself differently for each of us.

But, praise God, we have an amazing example of how to live in the midst of all of that stuff!

We’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a great company that no one can number; people who were a part of our lives, people that we know and love who, through it all, followed their faith, and who now stand in the heavenly throne room worshipping God eternally.

But, our celebration of these saints today is empty if we don’t follow the example they have set for us.

We have to look *“to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”*, (Heb. 12:2) and as that great company sings *“Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and always,”* (Rev. 7:12) our worship must join theirs; not just here, in this moment, but every single day.

That’s faith.

And here’s what we know – something that can encourage us AND give us peace:

That for all who follow the faith no matter what, *“the one seated on the throne will shelter them. They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will*

shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev. 7:15-17)

Not only do we celebrate the earthly lives of our saints, we also celebrate, with our worship, the One who provides those promises!

Amen!