

“Absence and Presence--In the Room, At the Table”  
November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17  
Luke 6:20-21

As with everything else this year, our observance of All Saints Day takes on a different character in this different context. It is not simply that we are separated from one another as we have been since March. Nor is it that we lack the jazz music that usually accompanies us on this day.

We mark this day remembering those members of this congregation who have died in the past year. We recognize that two of them died from Covid in the early days of the pandemic, while at the same time being well aware of the over two hundred thousand deaths from Covid -19 in our nation.

And yet, it is as though, as a nation, we don't want to acknowledge the absence, the devastation, and the disorder this pandemic is visiting upon us.

We know that this disease has affected Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans in disproportionate ways. It has exposed the unavailability of health care for the poor, the immigrant, the uninsured, and marginalized in our nation. It often seems that these are the people who don't seem to matter, people whose absence is not recognized or grieved except in the most private and personal ways.

But the great loss that has come upon our nation is not just private and personal deprivation. It is *ours*—yours and mine—as well. It belongs to our neighbors and to those whom we don't know. The great loss that has come upon our nation is just that: a national loss, an American absence.

Only as we acknowledge this loss will we be able to begin the work of creating a new future that will be something other than the restoration of a decayed order that has made countless people invisible. Only then will we be able to create something other than the numbed consumer society in which we have lived for so long, a culture that has made it possible for the deaths of 200,000 Americans to be obscured from our national consciousness.

One of the tasks that we have as people of faith in these days, then, is to remember those who have died, to make this absence real.

This is our challenge: to show 200,000 deaths; to show what actually has become over 225,000 deaths, as that number moves toward ¼ million; to make our remembrance public and open; and, as people of faith, to make known the deep consolation of God in our lives and in the life of the world.

The question we must ask ourselves, then, is not simply “Who are they who have died?” As important, we must continue to ask “Who are we, the living?” Longstanding inequities and structures of oppression have caused a disproportionate burden of illness and death to be borne by communities of color in this pandemic. Knowing this, who will we become — as individuals and as a nation?

Who are we?

And who will we become?

This is the day when we affirm that by God's grace, we are saints.

We can better understand this unseen, spiritual reality by looking at what we can see.

"A tree," Thomas Merton wrote, "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying God. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like God. If it tries to be like something else which it was never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give God less glory."

Perhaps we can say that the blaze of autumnal color that swept through here in recent weeks was the result of the worship each tree gives to its Creator. The brilliance and the death and falling of each leaf is a part of a tree being a tree—being itself and therefore giving glory to God.

Merton continues: "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem...is...finding out who I am and...discovering my true self. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them who they are without consulting them.

"With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not—as we please."

"For me to be a saint means to be myself."

We begin to answer the question, "Who are we?" as we recognize that we—and all people—are created in the image of God and that we—and all people—are of great value; that the great number of Covid deaths diminishes all of us and grieves all of us.

Luke begins his account of Jesus' sermon on the plain by saying that a great multitude—Jews and Gentiles, the sick and distressed—assembled to listen.

As we listen, we hear as they heard an invitation to be ourselves as we are.

There is no immediate call from Jesus to pray or perform any other religious act. "Blessed are you," Jesus says, "if you let the goodness of God flow through you. If in that love of God you find who you are."

Today we remember those members of our congregation who died in this past year, days so filled with death. We give thanks for the lives of Judy Doorenbos, Dee Fate, Dick MacMillan, and Frank Snider—for all in them that was good and kind and faithful. We remember the ways in which they showed gentleness and strength, the ways they lived with both faith and doubt.

Today, of course, you think of the saints in your own life—the women and men whose lives were marked not so much by goodness as by an honesty of self. Chances are they weren't people interested in showing you how religious they were. There were people who increasingly were themselves before God—letting God's goodness flow through them and being transformed by it. They were people who expressed in their lives who they were before God.

The light of their living and their dying gave glory to God. The more they were themselves, the more we are ourselves, the more God becomes known in this world.

Bruce Springsteen, now 71, recently reflected on death and loss as he talked about his new album. He said: "Well, the past 15 years, really, is when you notice people starting to check out early. And so that, that gets sad, you know, as you lose close friends. I lost Clarence [Clemons],

lost Danny [Federici], two guys in the E Street Band. Those are pretty difficult and painful experiences. And then a variety of other close friends...”

And when an interviewer suggested that he was keeping the dead close, he agreed: “Oh, yeah, yeah. We don’t get together without Clarence in the room and without Danny in the room. It’s very important.”

This life is not an isolated moment; it is a relationship that surpasses the temporal boundaries of living and dying. We keep the living and the dead in the room, at the table.

Our own immediate fears and needs, our own opportunities and options are not the boundaries of our existence. Each of our lives has a larger context of relationships, and we are responsible to those relationships—including our relationship with God—as long as life endures. Even through illness and the process of dying, we are not our own: our lives and what we do with them matter because they belong to God and matter eternally.

In Jesus Christ we hear the astonishing news that we are accepted and loved by God—as we are. Secure in that knowledge, you are set free to be yourself—to be a saint in the truest sense: not so much perfect as persevering; not one who has arrived, but a pilgrim on life’s journey.

With all the saints, may we here find the strength and the sustenance, the grace to be ourselves, the saints God created us to be. In that strength and with that grace, may we continue to work for the well-being of this nation and this world, even as we recognize and make real the death that surrounds us this year.

November drags in the early dark and a sense of things coming to an end. Vibrant color is swallowed up by deep darkness. The autumnal splendor brings with it a sense of foreboding for many. The chill in the air foreshadows the cold to come. The season of letting go brings with it a sense of longing memory. This time of fruition and harvest also brings with it a feeling of decay and death.

But it also invites us to look ahead. November leads us to reflect on both what has been and what is coming.

God is forever making all things new—and making us new as well.

We are people who have known the great loss and great sorrow that is a part of life. We know the great loss and great sorrow that is peculiar to our time.

As we keep those who have died in the room, at the table, let us become the people who can help our nation in these days of great loss and great sorrow.