

“Everyone Is Welcome”  
November 5, 2023

Revelation 7:9-17  
Luke 15:1-10

All Saints Sunday allows us to engage our common memory, to recall, especially, those who lived among this congregation: Sandy Boyd and Lee Wood, Marge Hoppin and Candace Noble, who sat and sang and prayed with us in these pews and in the choir loft, who drank coffee and ate with us in Rockwood Hall, who laughed and lamented and hoped and ministered to this world with us, even as they also ministered *to* us.

Through illness and difficulty, in the face of loss and death, they loved family and friends; they loved this life and this world. We give thanks for the unique witness of each these beloved members because in living and in dying, they showed us how to live in hope.

They kept their covenant with this congregation, walking with us in the ways of Jesus Christ. After all, we are faithful people, not in isolation but in community. And by the grace and mercy of the living God, that community extends not only in space but also through time. We are united in faith and struggle with those who came before us just as we are united with those who come after us.

In our remembering, we also affirm that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, surrounded not only by Sandy and Lee, Marge and Candace, but surrounded by those whom you have been thinking about while I have been talking—those who are not here and, at the same time, are very much with you still.

This day, then, raises the question: “Just who are these people whom we call “saints,” who go by the name “Christian?” And just who are *we*, as we remember and give thanks and come to the table again this morning.

When we try to answer the question “Who are these saints?” we might first want to ask, “Who is this Jesus whom they followed?”

Probably no one answered that question better than the Pharisees.

Now, the Pharisees have gotten a bad rap in the last two thousand years. In their day they were devout, religious people. They were pillars of the community. They look toward the resurrection of the dead. As I’ve said before, if you substitute “Congregationalists” anytime you see the word “Pharisees” in the Gospels, you’ll have a pretty good translation.

That, of course, does not mean that they always liked what they saw when they looked at Jesus. We don’t either.

The Gospel lesson that we heard this morning makes it clear that the Pharisees had a good idea of who Jesus was—and who his followers *are* to this day.

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

That pretty much says it all.

It says that in Jesus we discover the One who breaks down barriers, the One who extends God’s open love to all people. And here’s the thing: the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels really seems to be interested in food. When he heals someone, he advises, “Give her something to eat.” When he visits someone, there’s usually a meal involved—and Jesus is often providing the food. Again and again in the Gospels, Jesus eats with all manner of people—most of them not really a part of polite society.

And this is where we begin to see something about who we are.

The Pharisees say two things about the people with whom Jesus eats:

We are sinners.

Now sin is one of those old religious words that a lot of people don’t like to hear anymore. We might have our problems, but we don’t like to think that “sin” is among them.

The twentieth century theological giant, Paul Tillich, gave us some help with this. Tillich recognized, as we do today, that “there are few words more strange to most of us than ‘sin...’” He also recognized that “there is a mysterious fact about the great words of our religious tradition: they cannot be replaced...”

“There are no substitutes for words like ‘sin,’” Tillich told us.

Following Tillich, I’ve often spoke of sin as separation. You’ve heard me say countless times that we are separated from God, from each other, and even from the best in ourselves.

It might also help to think of sin as our finitude, or limitedness. Our understanding is limited. Our abilities are limited. Our goodness is limited.

This separation and finitude show themselves in our actions, so well described in that classic prayer of confession: “We have left undone the things that we ought to have done and have done the things we ought not to have done.”

We are separated and limited. Let’s just say it plainly: We are sinners.

But that’s not the whole story.

We are sinners who are welcomed by Jesus. And that is the good news that we heard this morning.

The God who is made known to us in Jesus is the One who welcomes us and eats with us.

Our invitation to this table is a sign of God's love—a love that accepts us as we are, a love that feeds the hunger and thirst so deep within us, a love that overcomes our sin and reunites us with our self, our neighbor, our God. At this table we encounter the welcoming grace of God.

We often hesitate in the face of such a welcome.

Communion has been called the sacrament that people avoid—and for all sorts of reasons:

Some feel that they have no right to come to this Table because their faith is not strong enough or sure enough;

Because their life is not “spiritual” enough;

Because they talk a lot about feeding the hungry or sheltering the homeless or working for peace—but don't actually do much about it.

During Communion some feel only the absence of God just when they sense that it is here above all other places that we are supposed to feel God's presence.

Some feel like an outsider because they don't feel much of anything—neither a sense of sinfulness nor some great spiritual high.

Maybe your mind wanders or you look at your watch and think: “We're running long.”

This Table, this sacrament is for people like that—for someone like me or you.

Here's the good news: you don't have to do anything, be anything, feel anything to make yourself spiritually, psychologically, or morally worthy to come to this table. You don't even have to make yourself seem worthy by telling yourself how unworthy you are.

If your faith is weak and your doubts are strong;

if your motives are questionable and your spiritual life leaves something to be desired;

if your life will not stand examination—come to the table.

Jesus welcomes sinners—the broken, the despairing, the separated, the outcast. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them, with us.

But that is not all.

The God who comes to us in Christ welcomes not only you and the others who come to the Table today. God welcomes sinners and outsiders everywhere. As one person put it: “Sinners who are believers and sinners who are unbelievers...Straight and gay sinners. Right-wing and left-wing sinners. Sinners who are oppressors and sinners who are oppressed.”

You can probably find yourself somewhere in that list.

And you find yourself welcomed and invited.

We begin to know who Christ is when we come to recognize the love that God has for all people—all who, just like us, are separated and limited.

This does not mean we ignore the sinfulness that causes so much suffering and injustice.

This does not mean we accept the sinfulness that keeps us separated from one another and from God. But it does mean that when we speak up and take a stand for healing, for justice, we can never do it to humiliate, get even, pay back, defeat, or wipe out. We can only do it in the hope that we and others might be healed, restored, helped, included, and reconciled with God and with other human beings.

This may be the best reason for having a jazz worship service each year on All Saints Sunday. Yes, we like to hear “When the Saints Go Marchin’ In.” But jazz reminds us that all people are welcome, all people are included at the table.

After Tony Bennett died last summer, many of the tributes to him mentioned his disdain for bigotry. During World War II, He was demoted for bringing a Black soldier home for Thanksgiving dinner. Not everyone wants everyone welcome at the table.

One person pointed out that Bennett’s activism didn’t occur in a vacuum. He had great role models. Many White jazz artists were, well, antiracists, long before the word was invented.

Frank Sinatra, Bennett’s musical mentor, recorded with and relentlessly championed Black jazz artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie. When Sinatra once noticed singer Nat King Cole eating dinner in a hotel dressing room, he invited him to the main dining room, where Black people were not allowed. Sinatra then warned the hotel’s management that he would get the entire serving staff fired if they didn’t integrate the dining hall.<sup>1</sup>

I think this is the first time I’ve used Frank Sinatra in a sermon as an example of what it means to follow in the way of Jesus Christ—but there you have it: Inviting others, welcoming everyone at the table.

Be more like Frank.

In a small way this morning we affirm that the living Christ welcomes all people—and we hope that we too might extend such a welcome, share such grace, you know, be more like Frank.

What a surprise it would be if we were to discover that not just our reconciliation but the reconciliation of the whole world begins to happen as people like us—*sinners* like us, *saints* like us—gather at the table of the One whom we confess welcomes not just us but sinners and outsiders everywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/30/entertainment/tony-bennett-jason-aldean-blake-cec/index.html>