

NAMING THE SAINTS BEFORE US¹
Revelation 7: 9-17
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
November 2, 2008

We have gathered in this place because we know that our ultimate security is not found on Pennsylvania Avenue, nor is it found on Wall Street. Our ultimate security is in the God to whom we owe life itself. What happens on Wall Street, and who lives on Pennsylvania Avenue, is vitally important, and we will make our views on that known on Tuesday. Today, however, we gather to say that our investment in God has not devalued, that our faith does not rise or fall with Dow Jones, and that the value of futures with God can only rise.

Don't forget that this church was born in 1812, while this country was in the midst of a seven-year depression due to an embargo of shipping from England. We not only survived that crisis, but grew. Seven years after this church was born came the financial panic of 1819, which featured widespread foreclosures, bank failures, unemployment, and a slump in manufacturing. This church flourished during those years. We maintained a steady course during the dark days of the Civil War; we moved forward during the financial panics of 1873 and 1893, when the stock market and

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banking industries collapsed and there was a run on the gold supply. We moved forward with confidence during the Great Depression and two World Wars. We maintained our equilibrium in 1973 when OPEC quadrupled oil prices and in the early 1980s when inflation was difficult to control. We held steady in the early 2000s when the dot-com bubble burst and the September 11 attacks came.

And we will hold steady during these difficult economic times. We are not the first generation in this church that has been called upon to give generously when giving generously is difficult. There may be an economic and political storm outside. The winds of time and the waves of difficulty may batter us. But we will move forward with confidence and faith.

I

On this Sunday, when we observe All Saints Day, we remember those who sat where we sit. But this is not just a time to look backward. We honor those in the past in order to live better in the present and plan for the future. We name the saints **before** us, not behind us. They are always before us, leading the way in the great procession of life that leads ultimately to the throne of God.

That, of course, is the image in the famous passage from the book of Revelation that we read a few minutes ago: *...there was a great multitude*

*that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne....*² The images used here meant something to the writer. We might use completely different images today: instead of wearing white robes we might make it a black tie and evening dress affair. Instead of palm branches in their hands we might give them cell phones. Every age has its symbols, and the chances are that if someone 2,000 years from now were to read our description of the black tie and evening dress affair full of people with cell phones in their hands, they may be as baffled about our symbols as we are about the symbols in this scripture.

So without dickered with the symbols, it is not hard for us to think of the meaning behind them. **There is in this passage a justifiable gratitude for the saints who have walked before us.** However we might picture life after death, or even if you picture nothingness after death, there is a sense of gratitude for those who have walked the way of life before us. They have, as the image in scripture puts it, *come out of the great ordeal*, which to the writer may have meant some kind of specific persecution, but to us refers to the inevitable ordeals of life itself.

² Revelation 7: 9.

This is a celebration of those who have passed through great ordeals and yet remained faithful. They kept believing, hoping, praying, giving, and witnessing to the truth as they understood it. Now they rest from their labors. Now they are in the presence of the Great Shepherd who, in the image of this text, wipes away every tear from their eyes.

II

I think it is well worth pointing out some particulars in this biblical image. **For one thing, the image is incredibly inclusive.** It is not nationalistic, or ethnic, or tribal, or racial in any way. We are talking about a multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-linguistic crowd. They not only sing the great old hymns, they sing gospel rock and rock of ages; they sing Bach and the Beatles; they rap and reggae for Jesus; they chant and cheer, shout and shiver, stand and kneel, sit and keep silence, raise their hands in prayer and keep their hands in their pockets and still pray. This is a picture of ALL GOD'S CHILDREN!

It's worth pointing out, too, that they are moving. They are in a parade, marching around the throne of God. No idling for this crowd! They are moving, for they are part of the parade of life, a great processional moving around the throne of God. And you and I are part of that parade! We cannot see these saints because they are out in front of us! They have

moved ahead, but the truth is this: we are in the parade because they showed us the way! We would not be here today if it were not for the saints who kept us quiet in the pews, whose laps we slept on when the sermon was too long, who guided us as youth, taught us in classes, helped us gain a formal education and the habit of life-long learning, stood by us in times of disappointment or loss or grief, and inspired us by their lives.

And I want to point out that in this biblical image they are dressed in white robes. The white robe in that day was a sign of victory. When a Roman general marched in procession to celebrate a military victory, he wore a freshly cleaned white robe. And he carried a palm branch as a sign of victory. In other words, no matter how you remember those you loved at the last, no matter how beaten down and defeated from age and illness their bodies were, this is a picture of triumph! They do not appear weary, battered, and worn before God; they do not appear eaten up with cancer or other illness; they appear as conquering heroes, washed and clean in the robes of triumph!

And they are not quiet about it. In this biblical image they are a loud and boisterous bunch indeed. They are shouting in triumph! They are shouting praise to the God who brought them through the trials and hardships and distress of life. It was God's presence that gave them

strength; it was God's power that upheld them through life and through death. This deliverance they are celebrating is special, for it is not the deliverance of escape from trouble; it is the deliverance that brings us triumphantly through trouble. It is not the deliverance that makes life easy; it is the deliverance that makes life great. It is not part of Christian hope to look for a life free from all trouble and distress; Christian hope gives us the assurance that we can make it through trouble and distress and come out to glory on the other side.

III

And did you notice this: ...they will hunger no more, and thirst no more....³ Here is a spiritual promise of the ultimate satisfying of the hunger and thirst of the human soul. This is the promise that shows up repeatedly in the words of Jesus: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*⁴ *I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*⁵ *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.*⁶

That is the reason we often speak of the Lord's Supper as a

³ Revelation 7: 16.

⁴ Matthew 5: 6.

⁵ John 6: 35.

⁶ John 7: 37.

foreshadowing of the great banquet around the throne of God, that day when we will join those saints in a spiritual feast. Meanwhile, we have this. If you thought you would never sit at the table with your loved one again; if you thought you would never break bread with your loved one again; if you thought your last meal had been eaten with your loved one; think again about this meal. This bread and wine are symbolic of that which fills our souls for eternity!

So even if on this All Saints Day we find ourselves shedding a tear of grief, we are reminded in this meal of the nourishment that comforts our hearts, wipes away every tear, and walks with us through all the sorrows of life. That is the reason this is more than a memorial meal; it is truly a celebration, a happy reunion, a communion!

And with the throngs pictured in this text, we can say today:

*Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen!*