

Hunger and Thirst No More – Revelation 7:9-17

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Last week, I asked you to raise your hands if you got up excited to go to church because it was Reformation Sunday. There weren't a ton of hands lifted.

This week, therefore, I won't assess the excitement level for All Saints Sunday, but I bet the response would be similar: Meh.

All Saints Day is November 1, the day after Halloween. And we mark it in worship on the following Sunday.

You've all heard the song, "When the Saints Go Marching In," right? *Oh, when the saints go marching in, oh when the saints go marching in. O Lord, I want to be in that number! Oh when the saints go marching in.*

My dad had long wanted that song to be played at his funeral. And in the end, it didn't make the cut for his service a month ago. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" was played instead. That was also a favorite of his (he was a veteran and a patriot).

There's an interesting phrase, though, in "When the Saints Go Marching In": "O Lord, I want to be in that number when the saints go marching in."

I want to be in that number...

It reminds us that one of the misconceptions of the term "saints" is that it's an exclusive club that we all have ambition for being included in.

In the New Testament, the word "saint," however, is used only to refer to all Christians—as the apostle Paul writes in introducing himself in Ephesians 1:1 "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus." The word "saint" is *never* used in the New Testament to refer to the best, most virtuous, or most faithful Christians—as it is sometimes referred to in the Roman Catholic church when identifying St. Mary or St. Peter.

So what is a saint? Not a super Christian. Rather, according to the New Testament, a saint is one who has been "sanctified" by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes to the church in

Corinth, “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Notice especially here that the words “sanctified” and “justified” appear to be synonyms or near synonyms. Sanctification (to be made holy) and justification (to be made right) are not two separate actions of God but one: “When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ ... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Hebrews 10:12, 14).

So, a saint is a Christian and a Christian is a saint—one who has been made holy by Christ. All Christians are saints, and all saints are Christians. At least that is what the New Testament usage of the term implies.

Therefore, All Saints Sunday is not a day to celebrate a sort of “Christian Hall of Fame.” Rather, All Saints Sunday functions best as the church’s memorial day. A day to celebrate that all of us are sanctified in Christ Jesus not by our own merits, but by the free grace of God in his son Jesus. It is a day to remember those saints who are living now—including those separated from us and, more specifically, a day to remember those saints who are no longer living, those who are dead in Christ—especially those very dear to us and those who have died in the past year.

It’s a time to remember—the value of both the saints in our lives who are here and those who have gone on to the church triumphant. And it’s a time to remember the reality that exists for all of us when we depart this life—and a glorious reality it is.

When my father died in October, I faced what the family members of all our saints we honor here today faced: grief over his loss. Dad was no longer with us and wouldn’t be with us again. His memory remained, of course, and will continue to, but he no longer will be the larger-than-life presence he was to his family and friends whenever we gather together.

At his funeral, we gathered to remember him and to commend him into God’s eternal care as part of the company of the saints. That was significant and reassuring: that he would live on with Christ forever as one of God’s saints.

As meaningful as that was, though, it was just as meaningful to be in the company of the 160 or so saints that gathered in my home church for his service. There were adults from my childhood there, who are older adults now. There were a few of my high school classmates there. There were friends of my parents from different seasons of their lives who I knew well, somewhat, or just a little. There were members of my home church, some of whom I hardly recognized. And of course, there were also many extended family members.

Those are the saints who have nurtured me to different degrees since my childhood. And they all came together to rally around my mom, my brother, and me in our time of need. I was uplifted by their presence, strengthened in my time of need, and, most importantly, reassured that the company of saints is strong among the living as it is in the glory of eternal life.

What unites us as the company of saints is the firm belief we take with us from the book of Revelation today:

The picture of Jesus' heavenly reign comes from Revelation 7—the host arrayed in white, as John describes it:

“[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 ...

“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.”

Apart from the very vivid language that John uses are words of rescue, comfort and nurture: These saints will hunger and thirst no more. The lamb, who is Jesus, will be their shepherd. He will guide them to the water of life and will wipe every tear from their eyes.

The great preacher Fred Craddock told the story of a young woman who learned she had a potentially fatal cancer. She had surgery, then some treatments. She was able to get on with her life for a time; but then, at a routine checkup, she learned the dreaded disease was back.

There was more surgery and further treatment. This time it took more out of her. Recovery was slower. But she persevered and returned to her life again.

Some years later, during another routine checkup, she learned the disease had once again returned. This time, the prognosis was grim. She spent some time talking with her friends; she prayed; and she decided there would be no more surgery, no more grueling chemotherapy. The young woman went home. Her friends gathered around.

One day, Death came and knocked at the door. Her friends rushed to the door and leaned against it, to keep Death out. Death went away. But Death came back, and this time Death not only knocked, but leaned on the door as though to push it in. The young woman's friends leaned against it all the harder. Death went away.

A short while later, Death came calling again. Death knocked on the door and leaned against the door. The friends made as if to stand against it, but the young woman said no, move aside. They looked at her as though she were crazy. She couldn't possibly know what she was saying. They refused to obey.

But she told them again, in a louder voice, to move away from the door. When they saw the steely determination in her eyes, they knew she meant what she said, so they moved away. Sensing no resistance, Death pushed open the door and came into the room. The young woman was sitting, propped up on pillows, waiting for Death, looking Death right in the eye.

When Death saw the strength of her spirit, Death looked beaten and ashamed. Death did take her, then — but Death knew that, by the power of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the communion of saints gathered there in that room, there was no triumph to be had that day. Death had been beaten again.³

In the company of saints here, and in the company of saints that resides in the church triumphant, death is swallowed up.

“For all the saints who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia.” Amen.