

See All the People

November 2, 2008

(All Saints' Sunday - Year A)

Revelation 7: 9-17

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

When I was a little boy, I can remember sitting on the cold linoleum floor of the music room in my church, sitting beside the piano as our teacher taught us hymns and church songs.

I can also remember my Sunday school teacher teaching us a little rhyme with matching hand motions to show us about the church.

As a child, you might have learned this hand motion about the communion of saints, as well:

It goes like this:

Here is the church.

Here is the steeple.

Open the doors.

And see all the people!

In the Book of Revelation, St. John the Divine records his vision of what the kingdom of heaven looks like.

In John's vision recorded in the Book of Revelation, he sees all sorts of trumpets and signs and angels.

Then, John writes:

“After this, I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and the Lamb,” crying out and worshiping God.

When we read John's vision of heaven, we open the door and we see all the people.

For the kingdom of heaven is filled with a great multitude of people, so many people that you can't even count them.

Sometimes, from the way people talk, it sounds like there are really not that many people in heaven.

Of course, everyone knows that we will meet Jesus in heaven.

So, that is at least 2 people in heaven:

Jesus and me.

Then, of course, my Grandma will be there.

So, now: that is 3 people.

And, Uncle Al will be there.

Well, no, that might be kinda iffy because Uncle Al always had a roving eye for the ladies.

I am not sure what God will think about Uncle Al's indiscretions - so that still just leaves 3 for sure:

Jesus, me and Grandma.

Oh, and I am sure that Mother Teresa will be there.

So, that's 4:

Jesus, me, Grandma and Mother Teresa.

And our narrow judgments can go on and on from there.

Yet, St. John tells us in his vision in his Revelation that there is a great multitude of folks who are the saints of God, so many people that no one can count them.

And all these thousands and millions of people in God's kingdom come from every nation, tribe, people and language.

We say:

Here is the church.

Here is the steeple.

Open the doors.

And see all the people.

And when we see who the people are in that great multitude in heaven, I bet that there will be some surprises.

In the late 80s and early 90s, Susan and I were adult youth sponsors in the church youth group.

Susan and I both enjoyed getting to know all the teenagers in the group.

One of the things that makes Susan and I feel old is that the "kids" that we had in our youth group are now in their 30s and many are married with children of their own.

And, interestingly enough, 3 of our "kids" from that youth group have

now gone on to become priests.

The latest one of those “kids” to go to seminary, I’ll call “Brandon,” to protect his identity.

When I ran into Brandon several years ago, he excitedly told me:

“Hey, Jeff, guess what?

Did you know that I am now in seminary to become an Episcopal priest?”

I must admit that I was surprised by this news, and replied:

“Wow! *You* are going to seminary?! That’s amazing!”

My shock and surprise hurt Brandon’s feelings I think.

So, I explained myself a little by saying:

“Well, Brandon, I must say that I am a bit surprised that you are going to be a priest.

Because my most vivid memory of you from our days in the Youth Group was when you were a freshman - and you rode in the back seat of the van on the way to a youth retreat at Camp Allen.

Then we got pulled over by the police because you kept mooning the other cars that passed by.

So, yes, I guess that I am a bit surprised that you are now going to be an Episcopal priest.”

I suppose we should not be surprised by those who enter the ordained ministry.

Just as we should not be surprised by all the multitude of saints who are in the kingdom of heaven.

For St. John the Divine tell us in his Revelation that when we open the doors,

When we see all the people,

We see all kinds of surprising people, from every nation, tribe, family and language.

St. John says that the communion of saints is filled with people from every tribe and family.

That means that if you find it intolerable to spend the 4-day Thanksgiving weekend with your in-laws,

Then you are going to be in for a *big surprise* when you see your entire extended family in heaven.

St. John says that the kingdom of heaven is filled with people of all nations and languages.

That means that if you get upset when you call into customer service and hear the recording:

“For English, press 1.

Para español, marque dos.”

If that telephone recording makes you upset,

Then you are going to be in for a big surprise when you hear all those languages from the multitude in heaven.

Yes, when we all get to heaven,

We are going to be surprised by who is there.

And maybe some people will be surprised to see you there, as well.

Now, it will not come as a shock to most of you to know - that I don't like surprises very much.

I like to work ahead and practice and plan for what is coming down the pike.

So, instead of being surprised by who we are going to spend eternity with in the communion of saints,

Let's go ahead *now* and practice and plan on living with all the multitude of folks that we are going to live with forever.

We can practice for heaven by worshiping together each Sunday, feasting around this Table with a surprising diversity of fellow saints.

We can practice for heaven by cooking a meal for a homebound or lonely relative or friend, who might get on our nerves, but who are our fellow saints.

We can practice for heaven by eating lunch at a taco stand in north Waco and meeting our fellow saints.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we practice for heaven by opening our eyes, Opening our eyes to see that the saints of God are not just in church,

But the multitude of saints are, surprisingly, everywhere.

So,

Here is the church.

Here is the steeple.

Open *those* doors and see....

See *all* of God's people.

AMEN.

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