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Revelation 7:9-17

7:9 After this I looked, and there was 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.

7:10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

7:11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

7:12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

7:13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

7:14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "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.

7:15 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.

7:16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

7:17 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."

Proclamation of the Word

Laurence Stookey was a professor whose books I studied in Seminary.

Stookey tells the story of a friend of his who explained to a Protestant class about the meaning of All Saints Day. A student abruptly stood up and replied, "Protestants don't have saints!" The professor, in a moment of quick wit, ran to his office to grab a phonebook, and he asked the student to read the names of all the churches in the area. The student read, "St. James Baptist Church, St. John's Lutheran Church, John Knox Presbyterian Church," until he gave up and said, "I get it ... I'm wrong!"

It became obvious to that student, and to the whole class, that we all have saints -- those who are deceased, and those who are living and walking among us, and if we think with Paul, perhaps even we ourselves are saints.ⁱ

Last week we focused on the Reformation cry that we are Justified or made right with God by faith through God's grace. Today we remember that Christians are sanctified- to live in obedient response to the Good News of salvation. God intends to make us saints even though we are sinners.

Justification tells us that Christ is our Savior that died for us. Sanctification tells us that Christ is our Lord who commands us to live for him.

In the Baptism covenant God makes us a promise, "I will be your God." And we respond to God's command: "You shall be my people."

In other words, where there is Christian faith, there must be Christian action.

We are called through our Baptism into sainthood. God's grace is generous, but not cheap. It is costly. And God's Holy Spirit helps us live faithfully. Our Fort Hill Faith practices are ways we live out the faith. These habits help us grow into mature Christians and not just baby Christians. Just to remind you, they are:

- Worship Weekly-in order to grow we need love.
- Serve Eagerly-in order to grow we need to exercise.
- Study Scripture Purposefully -in order to grow we need to eat.
- Build Relationships Intentionally -in order to grow we need care.
- Pray Daily -in order to grow we need to breathe.
- Give Generously -in order to grow we need to share.
- Share the Good News Joyfully -in order to grow we need encouragement.

I will be your God, and you will be my people- it is really a commandment.

So when we confess that we believe in the "holy catholic church and the communion of the saints," we mean "us"! This is us. We are part of the communion of the saints. Have you thought about that?

The church is the only club in the world, where none of us is qualified to be a member. But through God's grace, we belong to Christ and one another for the sake of the Good News of the gospel. We are still sinners, but we are *dissatisfied* sinners. We gather together in worship to admit we need help, need to change, and need forgiveness and to forgive. We need to grieve whatever losses we carry. We want to be better than we are. We get to be saints only because Jesus Christ is head of the church, and God the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer is holy.

I will be your God, and you will be my people.

We need God's help. That is what we experience at the Lord's Supper. We cannot live from our own strength. We have to be fed, nourished, and given new life over and over again. So we come to this Feast- Hungry. And we are sent out from this place to feed hungry people- people hungry for

forgiveness and acceptance, people hungry for food, hungry for new beginnings, hungry for justice, peace, and most of all for a God who cares. And we hear the promise again through touch and taste, "I will be your God." And we promise in return, we will be your people in and for this world.

It is a sacrament. A sacrament was a pledge of allegiance a soldier made to an emperor which became a sacred bond. But our first and ultimate allegiance is to a Lord whose life becomes gift poured out and given for us. And we gather here with a great cloud of witnesses, the communion of the saints.

Today, we remember those who have died in the faith as well as those who have been born to faith through Baptism. The ones who are worshiping now at the throne of the Lamb are under the good care of the Shepherd who comforts, keeps, and shelters them. I love this imagery. I can picture in my mind those saints in my life who had the most impact on me and who showed me best they could, the love of God. I see them now, sheltered, singing, and free of suffering. For they have been through an ordeal all of them. So we remember the parent, the grandfather, the baby who died too soon, the aunt who took us to church, the teacher, the coach, the friend, who showed us best they could of the love of God.

We remember the people who loved us, and for better or worse, taught us things. Dead and gone, we understand them better with time, and probably understand ourselves better, too. It's hard to describe what the "Communion of the saints" means, but they are saints in the sense that through them something of the richness and the power of God touched us, and continues to touch us.

I posted an image on our Facebook page that reads:

Suddenly, all my ancestors are behind me. "Be Still," they say, "Watch and Listen. You are the results of the love of thousands."

Because of them, we are...by the providence of God.

When we celebrate this sacrament today I cannot explain it except to say that they are here with us. They still live- even beyond time and space. Free from pain, all tears wiped away, they are set free. They are not idle though, but living somehow in a new reality- worshiping, moving, blessing together in unison. They are a multitude of every tribe and nation, so not just the ones we love, but all God's children- the Beloved Community. At this table we are united at the feast prepared in the kingdom of God. At this table we see ALL of God's people living united, reconciled, at peace. No hunger or thirst, but streams of living water, all tears wiped away.

Like Professor Stookey, I have a book which shows me the saints. It is not the Phone book. It is the Fort Hill church directory- your photos. It shows us what a saint looks like.

I will be your God, and you will be my people.

But this vision from Revelation reminds us of who we are called to be- a Beloved Community who seeks to actively serve, freely worship, and work to end divisions with all peoples. We are sheltered and loved by the Lamb upon the throne.

Today we give thanks for those who came before. And the persons we might grow to be by the grace of God. We come to this table, a love feast, set to provide our needs and send us out filled to gills in order to serve the God who loves us and the people God places in our paths. Last week I found this sign in a store which I brought home to hang above our kitchen table. It reads, "Any meal shared in love is a feast."

Let us remember the saints. Let us strive to be them.

Sing *Be Still My Soul* (Choir 1, 2) Names the Saints, Litany, Sing Be Still (vs. 3)

Communion Invitation to the Table

People will come from east and west, from north and south, from Six Mile, Pendleton, Seneca, and Clemson to sit and eat in the kingdom of heaven.

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God. Let us get ready!

We Come to the Feast- Tablecloth (4 helpers), Bread (3 helpers: gluten free, loaf, basket), Juice (4 chalices and 2 pitchers).

Closing prayer:

Number us among your saints, O God, and join us with the faithful in every age, that strengthened and supported by them, we may run the race that is set before us until we stand before the Lamb living securely in freedom and joy forever at your feet. Thank you, Lord, for uniting us with Christ and making us one with your people in all places and times. Thanks be to God who gives us the Victory through Christ Jesus our Lord!

Benediction

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord until Christ comes to take us all home.

Know that you belong to the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Read more Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 141-142.