

Sermon for Sunday, November 5, 2017

Saints of Communion

Revelation 7:9-17

The *Book of Revelation* is a strange book in the canon. It defies comparison. It provides imagery of paradoxical juxtapositions, foreboding images of what is yet to come, and stretches language almost to the breaking point. And even though people have tried to unlock its mysteries for millennia, its surrealistic word pictures resist any attempt at reducing them to facile interpretations. This truly inspires confidence in the preacher, whose task it is to do just that: speak about the mysteries of heaven and earth to God's people. You can tell by virtue of my convoluted introduction that I am not at all comfortable standing where I stand. I am merely stalling, buying time. This is also the book John Calvin never dared to comment on; hence, I am not alone in my reticence. But since you and I don't have all day, I might as well give it a try.

One of my New Testament professors taught me that it's never a bad place to start interpreting a text by paying attention to its *genre*. *Revelation* happens to part of scripture's *apocalyptic literature*. "Apocalypse" here does not mean "everything is going to h... in a hand basket scenario." It literally means the "drawing back of a curtain," an unveiling of the cosmic drama of salvation, reconciliation, and redemption. It is a preview of the way life is supposed to be. It is not like your average *YouTube* movie trailer that is designed to get us to go to the theater and see the whole thing. Rather, it is a glimpse, like a flash, of the whole thing. It is not a teaser. Rather, this is it. Our text presents us with a reality of and in heaven as it is supposed to be on earth. It is designed to be breath-taking in the best sense of the word. Let's take a look.

What the visionary John, who is exiled on the Greek island of Patmos, has us see is a "great multitude which no one can count, from every nation and tribe and people and language." This royal gathering has one purpose: "And they all fell on their faces before God's throne and worshiped, saying: Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen." This countless multitude of people have come to ceaselessly serve God who is their eternal protector. They can do this because they do not lack anything that would distract them from worship: "They shall no longer hunger or thirst, nor will the sun strike them nor any heat. The Lamb on the throne will be their shepherd and lead them to the springs of living water. And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes." Wow! Breath-taking, indeed. This is how it is in heaven. It is not how it is on earth.

While God and Jesus by the power of God's Spirit fling the doors of heaven wide open so that a gazillion people from all nations, tribes, and languages can come in, the nations on earth—mostly governed by men (and I mean men)—only want to deal with one nation, one tribe, and one language—namely their own. While heaven in John's vision has no borders, walls, fences, or missile defense shields to keep folks out, the rulers of this world over are trying their best to keep the doors of their countries shut. While God extends God's unmerited grace to a countless multitude, which happens to include you and me, we often withhold that grace from others as if it were really ours to dispense. This ought to be particularly unsettling for Christians because our core

narrative, our formative story, is based on a refugee family—Mary, Joseph and Jesus—seeking shelter from persecution which no one wants to grant to them.

On Friday evening I was privileged to attend the 150th anniversary celebration of the *Shaare Emeth* congregation on Ladue and Ballas and witness the re-dedication of their sanctuary. It was a grand and worshipful occasion. Their guest speaker was Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the current president of the *Union of Reform Judaism*. He reminded the congregation of the story of Abraham and Sarah, and how God promised that their descendants would be as countless as the stars in the universe or the grains of sand on the sea shore. And how they practiced what he called “audacious hospitality.” At the time of Abraham and Sarah, Rabbi Jacobs said, there were no Jews, just two people doing the right thing, welcoming strangers just as God had welcomed them. “What would it look like if we lived like this today?” he asked. “What would ‘audacious hospitality’ look like now?”

It strikes me that the way the biblical story began—with the promise of a countless multitude of God’s people—is the way the biblical story ends. What began with an earthly promise, ends with its heavenly fulfillment. What began with God’s call for audacious hospitality, love, and justice here and now, ends with “shalom”—God’s Reign of ceaseless heavenly worship and never-ending peace.

In our Christian tradition, we have a name for this countless multitude of nations, tribes, and languages. We call them the “communion of saints.” A saint is not some special holy person. She or he is simply a baptized, beloved child of God. Warts and all. We give thanks to God for the countless numbers of saint today. Especially, we give thanks to God for those saints who died last year and who have joined the people of all nations, tribes, and languages in the eternal praise and worship of God.

However, there is more to this than first meets the eye. It is not the communion of *saints* who are placed in the spotlight. John of Patmos tells us about the saints of *communion*. This is an important distinction. John’s emphasis belongs to the heavenly *communion*, where all of the artificial distinctions we design to keep each other apart fall away before God. This communion, the countless multitude of nations, does not know such human-made divisions anymore because for them God truly is all in all.

For the saints of *communion* of this side of the resurrection, for you and for me, this means that while we are here on earth, we are responsible for each other. We are indeed our sisters’ and our brothers’ keepers. Not just keepers of those saints who belong to our American Christian, Presbyterian Church (USA) tribe, but to the saints of the great multitude of all nations, tribes, and languages.

Our magnificent new banners will serve us as a visual reminder of God’s call to audacious hospitality, love, and justice. The story of the five loaves and two fish is Jesus’ way of inviting all people into God’s grace which is farther and deeper and broader and wider than we could ever fathom. They will serve as a visual reminder that we are indeed each others’ keepers, especially keepers of “the least of these,” the poor, the hungry, the outcasts and the refugees, the oppressed and the disenfranchised. And they will beckon us, over and over again, to come to God’s table, the heavenly banquet, where we will hunger and thirst no more, where God will wipe away all tears from our eyes, and where God, finally, will be all in all.

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