

Mike Bennett
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
All Saints Sunday (Family Communion)
November 5, 2006

John 11.32-44
Revelation 21.1-6a

The Church Triumphant

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...”
--Revelation 21.1

Have you ever been to a family reunion? Perhaps it was a small one with just your parents, brothers, and sisters. Or maybe it was a big one with many generations and branches of the family represented. At such a reunion, you'd meet many people you didn't know before. But they are, in some sense, part of your family.

The Sacrament of Communion is like a family reunion for Christians. One of the things we believe about Communion is that it bridges the chasms of space and time to bring us into fellowship with all Christians—all the members of our Christian family. At this table, we share Christ's body and blood with Christians in Haiti and elsewhere in the world. At this table, we are gathering with those who have gone before, our ancestors in faith. This isn't a simple thing. It is a mystery. And that's okay.

This is an especially good day to think about this aspect of Holy Communion. On the Christian calendar, the first Sunday of November marks a significant time. This Sunday is often designated as All Saints Sunday. This is a day when the Church takes time to remember all of the ancestors in faith—the people who have gone on before us: preaching the gospel, tending to the needs of the faithful, instructing young people in the way, being a life-giving leaven in the midst of the world.

By “saints,” we don't just mean famous Christians who accomplished great, public acts of faithfulness. We mean all Christians. The ministry of the Church requires a nearly endless stream of small individual contributions. Throughout the history of Christianity, people have responded to the call of Jesus Christ in their lives. Some have been famous, to be sure, but most have not. It is like that big family reunion. There might be one or two celebrities or big shots in the bunch, but not everyone is famous. But they all still belong to the family.

But All Saints Sunday is not simply an exercise in looking back into the past. True Christianity never allows itself to collapse into nostalgia. Christianity is, indeed, a religion of remembering. But it is not *only* a religion of remembering. In a very consistent way, the Bible is always calling us to look *ahead*. Christianity is a religion of *anticipation* as well as a religion of remembrance. These two emphases come together beautifully in the Sacrament of Communion that we will share this morning. In that holy meal, we remember the last supper that Jesus ate with his disciples. At the same time, we look forward—we whet our appetite—for the heavenly feast that is yet to come.

Fittingly, the Bible readings for All Saints Sunday are texts that speak of new life and rebirth for the community of faith. Just as Jesus gave new life to Lazarus, so does God promise new life for the gathered family of believers. The Book of Revelation can be a very strange and confusing book, but there is nothing obscure about its final vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more....And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away....It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”

(Revelation 21.1,3,4,6)

In this comforting poetic vision, John echoes words of Old Testament scripture that make similar promises. The prophet Isaiah, as well, looks forward to a coming banquet of unimagined joy:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

(Isaiah 25.6-8)

It is necessary for the Christian Church—indeed for every Christian congregation—to take time for looking back. We need to remember the struggles and sacrifices of our ancestors in faith—from those early Christians (like the author of Revelation) who suffered persecution under the Roman Empire to our own more recent forebears here in New England. We need to look back: to honor the past, to remember the saints.

But, we also need to do as the past saints themselves did: to look forward. In our dark and troubled moments, we can take encouragement from the promised reunion of all of the saints—past, present, and future—in the great Church Triumphant. This triumph is not a statement of pride and self-confidence, but rather an affirmation of our trust in God's promises.

A new day is coming! Let us await...and let us prepare.