

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
All Saints Sunday
Revelation 7:9- 17

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!

One of my favorite activities each week happens early on Monday mornings, when a small group of us meets for prayer. This prayer group is *not* exclusive; any and all are welcome to join us! Our purpose in gathering is to pray over each of the prayer requests from the prayer chain and to offer our praise, thanks, confession, and personal prayer requests. It is an honor to participate in this space of honesty, trust, and vulnerability.

In a recent gathering, Carol Couper named our current cultural state simply and profoundly. She said that we are living in a time of “I’m ok; you’re *not* ok.” It is a culture for whom humility has been *lost*, and perhaps never learned.

As I sat with her words, I realized how true they are. We have in-groups and out-groups, and our in-groups have become increasingly small, because in order to be on the “in,” you must agree as I think you ought, and agree right now. For many, this has been incredibly isolating and disheartening.

I will speak for myself, and say that I have felt nearly paralyzed in this time of “I’m ok; you’re *not* ok.” *Should I say something? Should I not? What if I say something that sets someone off? What if I say something that causes people to leave the church? How can I faithfully lead in a time when our culture is so divided and each person is looking for just that “right” trigger word to put an “x” on you, and kick you out of the group?*

The truth is that life, and we, are *dynamic*. We change, we grow, we look back and realize that we are different people than who we were back then. On our own, I am *not* ok, just as you are *not* ok. We are all sinners in *desperate* need of God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus.

In times like this, we need reminders that we are *not* alone, reminders that there have been many faithful, yet sinful, saints who have gone before us, *and* many faithful who will come after us.

This encouragement was one that first century Christians needed when John the Seer wrote Revelation. The church needed encouragement in the face of isolation and serious persecution. Christians were marginalized, had no power, and were dying for the faith. Some were losing hope and others had no passion. Still others were stalwarts in the faith; they could not be shaken!

John received a vision from Jesus to encourage the church to remain steadfast in the face of what was to come. This vision came as many do, in pictures, like dreams. His vision was in a then familiar apocalyptic style; not meant to be taken *literally*, but of course, *seriously*.

In his vision, John sees a throne room with four creatures with eyes all over, twenty-four elders dressed in white with crowns on their heads, angels, One who is seated on the throne, and a lamb who looks as if he has been slain. The One on the throne holds a scroll that no one is worthy to unseal – no one, except the lamb. The scroll has seven seals, and as the lamb removes each seal, John sees a terrifying image.

The opening of each seal reveals that there will be imperialism, wars, injustice, persecution of the saints, and destruction of the earth. And in the middle of this vision, an angel

comes, commanding that the destruction of the earth *not* take place until a seal is placed on the servants of God to protect them (Rev 7:3).

John *hears* that 144,000 are sealed, 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel. This number, 144,000, is symbolic, representing “fixedness and full completion, 12 x 12 taken a thousandfold.”¹ Verse 9 says that after this, John *looks* and *sees* a great multitude, so large, that no one can count, “from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the lamb.” Those who have been sealed are so numerous and so different, that John looks on, *amazed*. They have been spared utter destruction, but they have not been spared serious pain. They are dressed in white robes and hold palm branches of victory. “They [cry] out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the lamb’” (Rev 7:10). All the angels, elders, and the four living creatures fall on their faces before the throne and worship God, saying, “Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” (Rev 7:12).
(pause)

John has a conversation with one of the elders about who this multitude is, dressed in white, waving palm branches. The elder says, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (Rev 7:14b).

Now, this word, “tribulation,” has become popularized in recent decades, indicating a *specific* time of suffering in history. The Greek word for “tribulation,” *thlipsis*, is non-specific,

¹ Eerdmans, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, 1290.

meaning “trouble, distress, hard circumstances, [or] suffering.”² It’s a word used in Romans 8:35, when Paul asks, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall [tribulation] or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or sword?” And in Romans 12:12, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, constant in prayer.” And in Revelation 1:9, “I, John, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation...” This great tribulation is an *undefined* time of suffering, which happened in the first century and will continue until Jesus comes again.

In this vision, this great, diverse multitude, has experienced suffering. They have suffered and endured, and are now wearing white and waving palm branches of *victory*. They no longer suffer or endure pain, and have been spared from ultimate destruction because they have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (Rev 7:14b). “Therefore,” the elder says, “they are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His [presence] over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7:14b – 17).

What a beautiful image of this promise to come! Suffering that is not in vain, washed clean by the blood of the lamb, surrounded by saints from all over the earth from every time and place, worshiping and serving God, blanketed by the presence of God and shepherded by Jesus.

² Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, 83.

We yet await this vision, until God's purpose has been fulfilled. And we can speculate when this will be until we're blue in the face, but only God knows. It might be today or it might not be for many centuries. God only knows. Whether it's near or far, our calling remains the same: to live faithfully, in times of great suffering and isolation, and in times of great joy and friendship.

On this celebration of All Saints Sunday, you and I remember that we are *not* alone. We remember those who have paved the path before us, people who were deeply flawed and sinful, yet recognized in their humility that they were saved by grace through faith. Not through any goodness of their own, they were made clean by the blood of Jesus, brought into God's family through baptism and continually renewed by Jesus' presence in holy communion.

One of the truly wonderful aspects of holy communion, is that it is not a "Jesus and me" kind of thing; we are joined by our church community, Christians around the world, and Christians who have gone on before us and are now with Jesus. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, too numerous to count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, including loved ones from St. Timothy's.

You are *not* alone. And as with all of the saints who have gone before you, your life has purpose. If you still have breath in you, God is not through with you yet. He will continue to mold and to shape you into the likeness of Jesus, until finally He brings you to be with Him, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, where there is no more crying or mourning or pain any longer. And you will join the great multitude, praising and serving God because of *His* faithfulness and love. Amen.