

All Saints Day, November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:4, 9-17

LFLC

In this morning's First Reading from Revelation,
we are shown a grand and panoramic sweep of John's vision of heaven
including the presence of 144,000 holy ones. . .the saints of God.

Now, despite some religious communities who are convinced
that the number of the saved will only be 144,000
(leaving everyone else in the heavenly dumpster)—
that particular number is not meant to be thought of as “exclusive”
but rather “unnumbered” or “innumerable”
that is, unable to be numbered.

You see, for ancient people—both Jews and early Christians—
numbers were not mathematics but symbols
For instance, there are “favourite numbers” such as the number 3:
Jonah was 3 days in the belly of the whale;
Jesus spent 3 days in the tomb;
God is understood as “Trinitarian”—that is, 3 in 1.

The number 7 is the number of completeness:
There are 7 days of creation with the 7th day being the Sabbath Day;
there are 7 letters to 7 churches in the Book of Revelation
along with 7 angels, 7 seals and 7 last plagues.

The number 12 stands for perfection
12 tribes of Israel; 12 apostles; 12 pillars of wisdom

Then there is the number 40 – In the story of the flood,
it rains for 40 days and 40 nights;
Israel spent 40 years in wilderness
and Jesus, the New Israel, spent 40 days in the wilderness
where he was tempted by the Evil One

Numbers are more than just numbers

Here, in the reading from Revelation, we have the number 12--
the number of perfection, multiplied by 12,000 = 144,000
which is the ultimate in perfection. . .a way of describing “everyone”

But that number is not so much referring to the number of the saints
as it is to the mercy of God – the unending, incalculable,
immeasurable, all-encompassing, impossible to comprehend mercy of God.

And what that means is that where we draw lines, God doesn't;
where we include a select few, God includes the many;
where we reject others, God expands their numbers
to people of every nation, race, tongue
and language and way of life.

So, 144,000, then is how we are to understand how great,
how splendidly merciful and generous is the love and grace of God

But that love of God isn't just for "everyone" in general.

It also includes "individuals", and specifically those
who don't seem to fit into our society. . .
those whose talents and weaknesses
are not wanted or applauded in our world.

In Jesus, we learn and see that God is far more accepting and welcoming
than we ever dreamed of. . .and, for proof of that,
just look at the Beatitudes in Gospel reading from Matthew.

In these sayings, we catch a glimpse. . .or a good look. . .
at the character, nature, and thoughts of Jesus when it comes to people
who have fallen through the cracks of human life.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is telling his listeners back then. . .and us:

"I'm concerned about these people, too.
They have my compassion and my blessing."

The poor, the sorrowing, the lonely, the thirsty, the single-hearted,
the persecuted, the peace-makers and, even and maybe those
whom John Lewis, the civil rights leader from the 60's who just died recently
described as: "those who make good trouble"—
all of them. . .the people who don't quite "cut it" in life—
those are the ones Jesus is most concerned about.

And, to be honest, many of us, not only come from
 each of the categories described by John—
 that is, every race and tongue and nation and tribe—
 but many of us. . . maybe even most of us. . .
 identify with the descriptions Jesus lays out in the Beatitudes. . .
 that is, those who are broken and wounded in some way.

I mean, all of us, to one degree or another, are or have been wounded
 by abuse or divorce, cruelty, bullying or failure of some sort;
 all of us hurting because of fear over something from our past
 being revealed. . . or fear of becoming infected
 by the virus in the present;
 or fear of what could happen in the future;

 all of us, in some way, are acquainted with
 depression, discouragement, being disheartened;
 struggling financially, feeling lonely, lost or unloved;
 dealing with serious or chronic illness;
 mourning the death of a loved one or loved ones

All of us have more than a nodding acquaintance
 with something Jesus addresses and seeks to comfort.

Now, I'm not implying there is no joy or gladness or cause for celebrations
 among those in our household of faith. . . but all of these descriptions,
 whether good or bad, happy or sad, contented or discontented—
 all of these descriptions, conditions and situations
 which that span the breadth of the human condition
 are what we bring to God in and as the offering of ourselves.

And God receives these offering of our lives, takes them,
 blesses them and then gives them back to us.
 God gives us back our same old lives
 with all their wounds and struggles and hurts—
 but gives them back to us. . . with one big difference:
 God's own presence comes along with them.

When Jesus says "This is my body given for you"
 he is also saying "This is my body given TO you".

So don't be afraid; don't lose hope; be of good courage
because you are not alone; I am with you."

And then he takes us who have come together as individuals
to gather around Word and Sacrament, around Bible and Table—
he takes us who are part of a community, blesses us,
and "breaks" us up—that is, sends us out into the world.

And when he does that, something happens—
not only to us, but to the world as well.

Because wherever we go, whatever we do, whomever we see. . .
the same forgiveness, mercy, peace, courage, presence and hope
that we have received here or at home in this time together,
that we have been fed with and nurtured by word and bread together—
those same gifts are "gifted" to the world
in and through us who are God's "saints".

Now, I freely admit that it is not always easy to see or believe
that the world is changed by us. . .
and by the one who lives and moves
and breaths and acts through us—
but to those saints who see with the eyes of faith. . .
who look at the world through God's eyes. . .
it is what we happen. . .the world is changed
and the kingdom comes even if we have a hard time believing it.

Now, I know, or least suspect, that some of you out there listening to this
are saying either to yourselves or to me (in your minds or out loud):
"I'm not a saint and can't be a saint
because I don't feel like I believe enough. . .
or don't believe the right stuff."

But, someone much wiser than I once said:
"No one believes it all. . .and no one believes it all the time."

Now, to say "No one believes it all"
is the recognition and the admission
that each of us is gifted with only a partial grasp of the mystery of God.

And so we need each other to help learn, study, or see the larger picture;
to hear and discover other insights or other ways
of comprehending and expressing our faith.

And to say “No one believes it all the time” means that the journey of faith
is never smooth or uninterrupted but fluctuates between faith and unfaith--
which lets us know that doubts and questions,
and, sometimes even outright disbelief
are normal and expected human responses
to the mystery of God . . .and the mystery of faith.

And at such times, we need others in this “communion of saints”
to believe for us, to bear us up in their arms and their prayers
and so carry us through whatever troubles we are facing. . .
to trust for us until we can trust once again for ourselves.

The Rev. Herbert Chilstrom, a former and now late Bishop
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and his wife, Corinne,
know what it means to need faith to sustain us
through times of terrible heartbreak.

In August of 1984, their adopted 18 year-old son, Andrew,
shot and killed himself in the lower level of their cabin
while Herb and Corinne were sleeping upstairs.

Shattered . . .stunned. . .unable to believe their own eyes at what they are seeing--
Andrew’s suicide turned that place of life and fullness
into one of death and loss. . .into a place of pain and heartache.

Unable to spend time there any longer
without feeling angry and hurt and griefstruck,
Andrew’s mother, Corinne decided she had to do something
to find a way through this terrible loss.

So late one evening, on the anniversary of his death,
she walked slowly down the steps,
knelt beside the spot where they had found their dead son,
placed her hands on it, wept, and cried to God, asking for Jesus to come.

And he did. . .and he healed her. . .and from then on,
 that spot on the floor became holy--
 which meant that she no longer needed to run away from her grief
 and from the pain of being in that place they once loved.

In the book she later wrote titled, **Andrew, You Died Too Soon**,
 she said that not everything was suddenly made better or alright
 but something happened. . .to her and to her broken heart. . .
 and that something was Jesus' presence and promise—
 the promise of the hope found in the cross and the resurrection—

the hope of the ultimate restoration of all things. . .
 the hope which comes from the assurance
 that Andrew would be part of Revelation's vision
 of all the saints gathered around the throne of God.

In somewhat the same way, this meal today,
 as skimpy and sparse as it might look to others,
 this meal with its little wafer is not just an empty symbol
 but a sign and carrier of Christ's life;
 a sign of the presence of the kingdom here, in this place,
 in your home. . .in us. . .in all of us. . .and in the world around us.

And sharing in this meal is meant to be a foretaste
 of the vision and promise in today's text from Revelation:
 The promise that one day, all the saints. . .
 including us in this particular tribe of ours. . .
 along with our loved ones whose names
 we will remember and whisper in a few minutes—

the promise that, one day, all people, all creatures,
 the whole creation, indeed, the entire cosmos will be restored;
 and a vast multitude which no one can number
 will stand before the throne and before the Lamb
 and with a clear and joyful and strong voice, will cry out:
 "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving
 and honour and power and might
 be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

SDG