

SERMON: The Great Multitude  
TEXT: Revelation 7:9-17

11-1-20

My mother was a saint. My grandmother, too. I went to church with them every Sunday. Then there were the men *and women* who served the church where I grew up. The Reverend Jim Cook. The Reverend Sheila Gustafson. The Reverend Carole Lloyd. The Reverend Nick Van Gombos. All of them were involved in nurturing me in the faith and helping to form my faith. And there were Sunday School teachers like the Fry's and the Nelson's; fellow choir members like the Wilkinson's and the Knapp's; parents of my friends, the Johnson's, the Helps', the Swanlund's; and people I served with on committees like Gail and Carl. Then there was Janet - the first person who told me I should go to seminary. And others along the way who confirmed the call of God to me.

Of course, there were people outside the church, too, whom I would call saints. Not for their perfect faith or for their life without error or vice. But because they taught me something about faith and morality and how to live according to my Christian values. Teachers. Neighbors. Friends. Coworkers. Fellow students. Clergy colleagues. Children. Strangers. People I have loved. People I have not loved.

If I tried to count them all, I wouldn't be able to. It is a GREAT MULTITUDE of people, some whom I remember and some I don't, who have taught me something about myself and about God. About loving God, loving my neighbor, and loving myself.

I'm sure that if you were to stop and think about people in your life, you would also discover a great multitude of saints who have met you and helped you along the journey.

It wasn't until I moved to Cape Girardeau nearly three years ago, that I paid much attention to All Saints' Day. Of all the churches I have known and served, First Presbyterian in Cape Girardeau is the first one that wanted to emphasize and commemorate All Saints' Day. I am grateful they do. It has enriched my own worship life and has made me a better pastor.

The hymn *For All the Saints* is one of my favorites. It is majestic and celebratory and gives great honor to believers who have gone before us. It was written by William Walsham How, who was born into a wealthy British home in 1823. His father was a lawyer and his grandfather a preacher. Despite having been offered prestigious bishop positions, he wanted to serve in humbler places. He

served for 28 years as a country parson in the rural parish of Whittington. Later, he moved to London and began working tirelessly among the poor as an assisting Bishop. He became known as “the Poor Man’s Bishop” because of his concern for the poverty-stricken people of Victorian London. *For All the Saints* is among the greatest of his nearly 60 hymns, and it was written specifically for All Saints’ Day.

(Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul, Book 2*, p. 99)

John’s vision, described in the book of Revelation, includes “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.” This is an image of heaven. It looks nothing like the church you or I grew up in. Nor does it look like most of our churches today. In fact, 11:00 on Sunday morning has been described as the most segregated hour of the week in our country.

But heaven is not segregated. This GREAT MULTITUDE that John speaks of is a gathering of people of every color and race, from around the globe, every age, every size, every language, every nationality. To me, it is a magnificently beautiful scene.

Furthermore, one commentary explains about this multitude, “They are identified as *the people who have been through the great [ordeal]*. They are now “triumphant in heaven....” They are martyrs and victors. “They have *won* only from the heavenly perspective of the Lamb’s redefinition of winning; on earth they have been killed.... [However] their own death is not an accomplishment of which they can boast. It is Christ’s death, not their own courage and determination, which has given them their victor’s garment. Their death becomes one with the Lamb’s death.” (M. Eugene Boring, “Revelation,” Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p.131)

Especially in the year 2020, it is no exaggeration to define life on earth as a great *ordeal*. And we believe - or we pray - that we will one day join THE GREAT MULTITUDE of the triumphant in heaven. But until then, we are called to be saints.

Contrary to popular belief, saints in our reformed tradition are *all* Christians, not *super* Christians. You don’t have to have performed miracles or live in poverty like Mother Teresa to be a saint.

“A saint is a human being we celebrate for the sacrifices they make for their commitment to making the world a better place.” This is a quote from the 2014 movie, *St. Vincent*, starring Bill Murray. To summarize the plot: Vincent is an old Vietnam vet whose decadent and self-indulgent ways have left him without money or a future. Things change for him, though, when his new next-door neighbor needs a babysitter for her son, Oliver, and Vincent is willing to take the job, for a fee, of course.

Vincent has few redeeming qualities and is not the kind of person anyone would trust to care for their child. His house is in shambles. He smokes, drinks, gambles, cusses, and keeps company with *ladies of the night*. He doesn't like people, and people don't like him. And he is unashamed and unapologetic for his lifestyle.

But Oliver's mother is recently divorced and desperate. Oliver quickly takes a liking to Vincent for some reason, describing him as “interesting, in a grouchy sort of way.”

Oliver chooses to honor Vincent as a modern-day saint for a class project at school, and no one is more surprised than Vincent himself. Despite his questionable lifestyle and serious flaws, Oliver discovers several redeeming qualities in Vincent. Courage. Sacrifice. Compassion. Humanity.

I imagine that there are many like “Saint Vincent” among THE GREAT MULTITUDE in heaven.

As we face a difficult week - or possible weeks - ahead, we have very strong opinions about who should run this country. More and more we define people in terms of good and evil, saints and sinners, friends and enemies, honorable and despicable.

I have a framed picture in my dining room. It is no great work of art, but it has great meaning for me. It is of a long table, so long, in fact, that it fades off into the horizon, unending. The table is lavishly set for a great feast, with candles in the center and the most expensive place settings, complete with gold-rimmed china, crystal wine and water goblets, and more utensils than you know what to do with. It looks like only the rich and famous belong there. But because it extends into

eternity, I imagine that everyone is worthy. There is a seat for every saint at this table.

It is an image of the Lord's Table. And it reminds me that Jesus lived and died and was raised to make us worthy to come to the table. So, let us remember that our hope is in Christ above all else. And let us pray and strive to build longer tables rather than higher walls. For all the saints. And to the glory of God!

AMEN.