

The Communion of Saints

“Beloved, we are God’s children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Beloved. That is what the writer of the First Letter of John calls the people to whom he is writing. Bishop Epting, who preached here last Sunday, often addresses us as beloved. Of all the things that we believe as Christians, that can be one of the hardest things to accept – that each one of us is beloved of God. God loves us in spite of whatever we may have done or said. There’s accountability, of course – God also asks for repentance of those times we have walked away from God – but that doesn’t change the fact of God’s love. We believe that every human being is made in the image of God and so is beloved of God.

What’s also hard for many Christians to accept is that God even loves those who don’t believe in God’s existence. That includes an increasing number of people in our world. Personally, I’ve always had a lot of respect for agnostics, in particular, those who say that they can’t know whether God exists or not. I respect them because at one time in my life I believed Reason to be the highest good, the only way I could truly know anything. And I recognized that the existence of God could not be proven by reason alone. In that situation, the only honest position to take is to be an agnostic, to admit that one doesn’t know. That is different from atheism. Atheists make faith statements, even though they won’t admit it. Their faith is that God does *not* exist, just as a Christian makes a faith statement that God *does* exist.

So what makes us say that God exists? In addition to reason, Christians believe in revelation. We believe that there is more to life than what our five senses tell us, that reason is not the only way of knowing the world. Actually, everyone acknowledges that when it comes to beauty and the arts. I once took an entire semester course devoted to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. We spent a lot of time analyzing his many works. But studying Bach on the page was a much different experience from hearing a Bach fugue or singing the B Minor Mass. That feeling could not be analyzed, nor could I put into words exactly what those experiences were like.

In the same way, it’s hard to put into words what we are celebrating today on All Saints Sunday. We do have phrases we use. Today’s Collect refers to “one communion and fellowship in the mystical body” of Christ, and the Apostles’ Creed refers to “the communion of saints.” The passage from Revelation this morning describes a “multitude no one could count” from every place in the world. Somehow we have a sense, which does not come from reason, that we are

surrounded by all of those who have come before us – not only the generations who have been in this cathedral, which for some of you are real family members whom you remember or heard stories about, but also those who have been part of our larger lives and are no longer with us. What we celebrate today is that sense of belonging, being immersed in something greater than ourselves, larger than the time in which we live.

Time projects into the future as well as the past, of course. That is why All Saints Sunday is considered especially appropriate for baptism, for extending the Christian community forward. Today we will celebrate the baptism of Bennett Kilgore Winston. Bennett reminds us that the communion of saints extends ahead of as well as behind us. It's easy to believe that Bennett is beloved of God. Not yet one year old, he is curious and eager, drawing love out of all of us.

Through baptism, Bennet will be brought into the mystery of faith, a mystery into which we were all brought through our own baptism. This cathedral is architecturally designed to enhance a sense of mystery and transcendence, with its soaring lines and high windows. One might even say that the high altar is designed for mystery, as things happen there that most of us cannot see. Incense and chant and light through stained glass windows engage all of our senses in mystery.

One of my favorite Greek Orthodox writers, the English Bishop Kallistos Ware, says this about our faith: "It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers to every question, but to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder."

God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder. We find that wonder in so many ways – in music, in beautiful children, in the colors of the sky at dawn. It's a wonder, too, that God loves us. Today we're asked to enter into that mystery, which was shared by so many who have been here before us. Let it enfold you. Beloved, you are God's children now. What you and I will be, we do not yet know. But one day that mystery, too, will be revealed.

[All Saints Sunday: Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12.]