

Revelation 7:9-17
November 1, 2020
"The Family in Which You Are Always Loved & Never Forgotten"
Rev. Randy Smith

On the **civic calendar**, November 3rd is a Presidential election day, an election which is being termed as "the most important election in our lifetime". But the sermon this morning is not about the election, because today on the **Church's** calendar is "All Saints Day", and the Church's calendar always **trumps** (no pun intended) all other calendars!

So, a **quote** to begin this morning's All Saints sermon, from famous U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1841-1935): "Some people are **so heavenly minded** that they are **no earthly good**."

I'm suspect most of you have heard this quote before. I think I first heard it from my mother. I actually have no idea of the **original** context for his saying this, but I think it fits **any** context in which Christians demonstrate much more interest in the life **after** the one they are actually *living*, and *living in*, in the here and now. In a casual conversation this past week with a man here in Greenville, I learned that he is devoted to a Christian teacher who has his own ministry here in town called "Focus On The End Times" ("FOTET" for short). His whole ministry, i.e., is focused **away from** life in the here and now, and **toward** the life **after** this one.

Hearing this makes me wonder how much "earthly good" this man is good for. It makes me wonder, i.e., if this man has already given up **the "fight"** -- that "fight" which is **the essential character** of life in this world for those who follow Christ, who are his Church.

I began this morning with the quote from Holmes to make the point that it's critically important, every time we open the Book of Revelation, to remember that this is really a **letter**, by a Christian leader named John, and circulated among early Christian congregations around the turn of the 2nd-c. AD, a letter written to be a **source of hope** for Christians still in the world, **still engaged in** -- as the Apostle Paul once famously wrote -- "fighting the good fight", and who are **therefore** facing ever more intense **persecution** -- and sometimes even **martyrdom** -- within the society of their day. It was **not** written, i.e., to be a source of the kind of hope which leads Christians to *sit back* and just **watch** what is happening all around us in the world for the time that we are here, **passively awaiting** the life *after* this one.

Just as in John's day, so also in ours: his glimpse into the reality of heaven was for the sake of *inspiring*, and *spurring* Christians to **faithful, uncompromised living**, irrespective of how hard or easy they were finding it to live as what John terms followers of "the Lamb". It is intended to show that, no matter what is happening here and **now**, to you, to your family, on account of your faithful living, what is happening **eternally** is that your victory is already being celebrated in heaven, a celebration which -- you could say -- awaits your full participation!

What, exactly, *is* going on in John's vision? **Two things**. *First*, it is a **vision of heaven**, and of the **redemption of human life** which God *has* accomplished, *is* accomplishing, and *will yet* accomplish through **the Lamb** -- who is, of course, the *crucified and resurrected* Jesus Christ.

The redeemed are present in John's vision of the heavenly throne room because they are those "who have come out of **the great ordeal**; they have washed their robes and made them **white** in the **blood of the Lamb**". They are those who have chosen, i.e., to **engage** in the "**fight**" -- *viz.*, to *acknowledge*, and *live within* the **tension** of what the prevailing culture holds to be good, right and true, and what the Lamb has shown them to be good, right and true, namely **self-sacrificing love**. The **whiteness** of their robes signifies their **purity** or, i.e., their refusal to intermingle *faithful* with *unfaithful* living, and so allow the latter to **pollute** the former.

What this "fight" **principally** involves, of course, is the issue of whether human society will be organized in ways -- *only achievable* through a commitment to **nonviolence** -- which promote **justice and peace**, *or* in ways -- only achievable by one sort of **violence** or another -- which tend toward **injustice and division**. (Cf. Wesley's 1st General Rule for Methodists: "Do no harm" -- no violence.) Choosing to live as followers of the Lamb makes life -- *particularly* in certain especially evil contexts, such as Roman imperial persecution -- into an "ordeal", something like a continual "trial by fire".

The redeemed are there on account of their being **willing** -- **and able** -- to follow the Lamb in life *even* to the point of death, because they recognize that the Lamb served *them* in life, *even to the point of death*, even death on a **cross**. This is why they cry out loudly, "Salvation belongs to *our God* who is seated on the throne, and *to the Lamb!*" -- and not on account of anything *they* did.

And in heaven, John sees that the redeemed **enjoy** again, in *endless* supply, all they were willing to suffer -- on account of being a follower of the Lamb -- being **deprived** of in this life: *food, drink, shelter, and joy*. The Lamb who led them in their *earthly* lives *still* leads them in their heavenly lives, but now to

"springs of the water of life". And this yields their joy. A life without tears. Which makes, it seems to me -- given all in this life which leads us to shed tears -- **this** part of John's vision the most **comforting** of all.

On display here, **secondly**, is the **scope** of the redeeming work accomplished by God and the Lamb in John's revelation, which is **beyond** human imagining (cf. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." -- Isa. 55:8). In vv. 1-7, not just the original 12 tribes of Israel, but 12,000 **times** the original 12 tribes of Israel are redeemed! And in the reading this morning, we hear of the "great multitude that *no one could count*, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages". These are the **Gentiles**, *viz.*, all the other peoples of the world.

The message in this **accounting** of the population of heaven here is that there is no accounting of the population of heaven *possible*. None of our human questions, e.g., "How many people will qualify?", or "On what basis will they qualify?", or *especially* "Are the Jews in or out?" matter. *All* that matters is **the work of God through the Lamb**, the God who not only *does* not, but who actually *cannot* acknowledge the distinctions, the groupings and boundaries, the definitions of the "included" and the "excluded", we human beings insist on constructing and maintaining.

Given, then, that heaven will not only be a single, incomprehensibly **vast** neighborhood, a central part of the life of the followers of the Lamb involves looking upon **any and all** of the people in this world with whom we relate, in any way, and *regarding* them as **future next door neighbors** "up there": Antifa? The "Alt-Right"? BLM? The Proud Boys? President Trump? Vice-President Biden? Hunter Biden? Could be anybody. Can you even imagine?

Every time we recite the "Apostles' Creed" we affirm the existence of the "Communion of saints". This becomes especially meaningful on All Saints Day, which helps us *remember* this **connection** between ourselves and an **innumerably large** assembly of all those who have gone **before us** as followers of the Lamb, across all times and places.

Did you know that in the Eastern **Orthodox** tradition, they believe that, when the faithful gather around the Table to celebrate Holy Communion, the actual "attendance" at the Table **far, far exceeds** the number of people present? Why? Because at Communion -- the primary *symbol*, and *experience*, of the **whole family of God**, being fed the food and drink of eternal life by the Lamb who is their Shepherd -- the **whole family of God** is indeed *present*, from *across all times and places*.

Because we have all been **made**, by Baptism, **family**. **A family in which you are always loved and never forgotten**, a family which is, needless to say, *very different* than *any* earthly family -- including our church families -- where love regularly fails, and

family members are cut off *emotionally* by one another, *viz., intentionally* forgotten.

Once you're in the family -- by *grace*, by the *gift* of Baptism -- you're **in**. In this family, you never stop being loved. It's the "love that will not let you go". *And* it's the love which is **stronger than death**, the love which -- *after all* -- was able to keep the Father and the Son **united**, even through the experience of *forsakenness* on Good Friday, and *all the way through* until Easter morning. It is a love, therefore, the possibilities **of which**, and **for which**, are simply **without limits**. Of **any** kind.

A Christian author and poet by the name of Jan Richardson wrote this following the *sudden*, and *too soon* death of her husband, Gary, as she approached the *first* All Saints Day on which she knew she would hear her husband's name read in the Litany of Remembrance: "It Is Hard Being Wedded to the Dead".

<p>It is hard being wedded to the dead; they make different claims, offer comforts that do not feel comfortable at the first.</p> <p>They do not let you remain numb. Neither do they allow you to languish forever in your grief.</p> <p>They will safeguard your sorrow but will not permit that it should become your new country, your home.</p>	<p>They knew you first in joy, in delight, and though they will be patient when you travel by other roads, it is here that they will wait for you, here they can best be found</p> <p>where the river runs deep with gladness, the water over each stone singing your unforgotten name.</p>
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