

Rendezvous

Text: Revelation 7:2-17

Hymn: "Behold a Host, Arrayed in White" (LSB 676)

A handful of advertisements I've seen lately are trying to convince me that the holiday season has already begun. Black Friday is no longer the unofficial official beginning of the holiday season. No, it already started on November 1. That's when Starbucks rolled out its holiday brews, which means as we sit here we're already six days behind in our Christmas shopping.

The church has an unofficial/official beginning of the fancy part of the church year, too. I know that the season of Advent, the official start to the festival half of the church year, doesn't start until the first Sunday in Advent, which this year is November 28, but this Sunday, All Saints' Sunday, always the first Sunday in November, maybe *because* it's in November, feels like the beginning of the fancy part of the church year, at least it does to me.

And while the commercials want me thinking about the shopping part of the holidays, many of them cut away to the other thing that happens a lot during the holiday season—people gathered around a holiday table. I'm sure many of you will do lots of that in the next couple of months; you'll gather with friends and family and have a gay old time. But on All Saints' Sunday, instead of the people who will be gathered with you around that table, our thoughts turn to those people who will not be with you at those tables. In fact, you might even ponder for a minute and think back to the earliest holiday table you can remember—maybe it's a Thanksgiving or a Christmas table—and take note of the faces that are at that table. Then jump forward ten years and see if it's the

same faces. Maybe there are some bigger bellies and more gray hair but there's a good chance one or two faces have dropped out. You jump another ten years, some more faces gone. Another ten, another ten—it's like walking past a line of photographs on the wall or like swiping through images on your smartphone as those pictures change through the years.

In the next month or two, as the unofficial holiday season transitions into the official season, some of you will be missing some very important faces around the table for the very first time and that may be especially bitter. I can still remember the first Christmas after my grandfather died. After the sermon, we'll be tolling a bell in remembrance of a handful of those people whose first year not at the table is this one. But I'm pretty sure we'll be thinking about a great many more who having left our tables so many Thanksgivings and Christmases and New Years ago are still on our hearts and in our minds—saints of God, we call them. Because on All Saints' Sunday it's not just about those venerable saints whose names are written in the front part of the hymnal; it's about those saints whose names were written on place cards by my Aunt Pattie for the ornament exchange. (We had assigned seats, you know.)

I'm guessing it's those "place card" saints that you remember today more than the fancy ones. And it's not just you who remember them; those are the saints St. John is looking at, too. In fact, he looks at them twice. St. John the Seer, as he is sometimes called because of the wonderful vision he was given to see and record in the Book of Revelation, has two visions. A kind of binocular vision.

We heard about them in the first reading. First, he looks in one direction and sees "144,000 sealed." They're sealed as if for battle. It's a picture of the church

militant, the picture of people yet on earth battling, twelve times twelve thousand. This is reminiscent of the way God's people of old would line up for battle before they went out to war (Num 2:1-34, 31:1-6; 1 Chr 27:1-15). They're mustering. "Judah, 12,000: Here!" "Naphtali: 12,000, locked and loaded." "Issachar, 12,000." Who ever thinks of little Issachar? Well, apparently the Lord thinks of little Issachar, which is the point of the whole thing: Every single soldier, every single one marked and sealed, not a single one left out. All of those ones on earth battling their own sins and failings and demons, battling all the evils of the world, sometimes bloodied and battered and wounded, but marked with the seal of the living God, as if to say, "This one is precious to Me and no one will snatch them out of My hand." One hundred forty-four thousand, the poetically perfect number of completion, not a single soldier left out.

Many of those who left the empty spots at our tables are ones who have battled. They all battled, but some of them battled more than others. They may have even injured you in their battling and as they fell. (Some may even have fallen by their own hands.) However they fell, they fell as those marked with the seal of the living God. Which is the promise to you, too: You battle as yet a member of the church militant, but you battle as one sealed, so that when your time comes—and it will come—to fall away from those dinner tables, you will fall as one who falls into the hands of the living God, your dear Father in heaven.

Which is the second vision we get in Revelation. John probably gets whiplash looking through he binoculars. He is over here, he sees the church militant. But then the angel says, "Look over here!" Now it's a group that no one can count, from every tribe and nation and peoples and language. It's the whole church triumphant, all those

who rest from their labors, no longer in bloodied battle fatigues, but now dressed in pure white linen. Not because they were so perfect, because they absolutely were not. We'll sing in the closing hymn of the "faithful, true, and bold." We know that the saints were not always faithful, true, and bold. We should be careful. One day—who knows when?—some one will be singing about me. They'll sing of Pastor McGuire as faithful, true, and bold, but your pastor was also faithless, false, and cowardly at times. We don't need to whitewash any of those saints. We don't need to whitewash our stories or theirs, because we know their stories and they themselves are washed in the blood of the Lamb, washed and cleansed and filled and now singing, lauding, and magnifying the glorious name of the One who battled for them.

But still those empty tables. Still they are gone and we yet miss them, many bitterly. Around those tables, we may do things to try to make them somehow present. We'll tell stories about them, which is fine and good. We recall memories that are wonderful and comforting. We might even follow some of the recipes that some of those who no longer sit at those tables used to provide for us. But Gran Gran's fried chicken is not Gran Gran, and to remember your beloved saint is not your beloved saint.

But we have something today better than a mere memory. We have a table. And I don't mean the table which you saw in your mind's eye. I mean the Lord's Table. While those loved ones do not have spots any more at those holiday tables, they have one at this table today and are as present here as you and I. You might say, "Ah, that's a nice sentiment." It is a very nice sentiment, but it's also as true as Jesus is the Truth.

"How do I know this?" you ask. Now you have to stay with me for a minute, but it's worth it in the end. I know this, first, because I was listening in math class when Mrs.

Sewell, my fifth grade teacher, taught me and the rest of the class something called the transitive property of equality. You may remember; you most likely do not, because it is the least impressive of the mathematical properties. The transitive property says something as banal as “If $a=b$, and $b=c$, then $a=c$ ” ($2+2=4$; $4=3+1$; then $2+2=3+1$).

To which we said to Mrs. Sewell, “D’uh! Everybody knows that. Teach us something we don’t know.” Well, I said “d’uh” until Pa Pa died. And a fourth-year seminarian reminded me of some things from Jesus and the Scriptures and the Catechism about Pa Pa and this table. This is where you have to follow me. Pa Pa died 25 years ago, which means he is with Jesus. We can say lots of things about our loved ones but the one thing we can say for sure our loved ones who have died in the faith is that they are with Jesus. He was marked, sealed and now Robert Rutledge is with Jesus. A is with B.

At this table we have Jesus’ promise that He is here present as present can be. His Body and Blood for me. There is no place in the universe where Jesus is closer to me and closer to you than this day when He is with us, even in us, through and in His Lord’s Supper—His very body and blood. Jesus is with me. B is with C.

What’s that again, Mrs. Sewell? I think I’ve got it. How glorious is that transitive property of equality! Robert is with Jesus. Jesus is with me. Therefore, Robert is with me. And all the saints are with me.

Do you see what this means? All of those loved ones, the ones you long to hold and see and smell, are gone from those holiday tables. But at this Table they are present. Of course, our church doesn’t call it something silly like the transitive property of equality. That’s for fifth grade math. We have given it a much more profound and

churchly name, stuck it in the Creed, and called it the “communion of saints.” That is what this is. We have the promise that at this table Jesus shows up. And when Jesus shows up, He brings His whole body, He brings all his friends, He brings Pa Pa and the ones we toll the bell for today, and all those people who are on your hearts and minds today. And on All Saints’ Sunday, here church militant and Church Triumphant meet.

You may have a practice of recalling memories of those loved ones. Maybe you make a point to visit their gravesides, a fine, salutary thing to do. Maybe you imagine them watching over you at all times, and maybe they are! That one for me is hard: it’s embarrassing enough to know Jesus is watching over me all the time; I’m not sure I want my grandmother watching over me all the time.

Those things are fine and you do them and enjoy them and are comforted. But I would pray that you would learn to love this table. Love the Lord’s Table as your weekly meeting point with those who have passed through the veil, the weekly rendezvous point where that veil is peeled back for just a moment and heaven and earth touch and Jesus and all those with Him are with you and present with you as the bread is on your tongue and the wine is in your throat. What joy!

On a day like today—all those memories!—there may be some welling up of the eyes, tears of sorrow spilled. But I pray they would be mingled with tears of joy, knowing that those loved ones are not forever gone, knowing that at this table they are present with you. The Body and Blood that fed them feeds you for strengthening of body and soul to life everlasting until that final day when the One who holds all the saints together wipes away the tears from every eye. Amen.

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