

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne... Revelation 7:9

All Saints' Sunday is one of my favorite celebrations. I think it's a feast day that grows on people the longer we've been in the Church, at least, that has been my experience. Perhaps more than any other liturgy – even Easter, even Pentecost– All Saints' is to me all about community, about communion.

Recently I had the honor of presiding at my Harvard reunion's memorial service for our classmates who have died. This year, the service was the first reunion event that gathered us together. It's always a moving liturgy. We have short readings from a variety of faith traditions, and we read the names of all the classmates who have died since our graduation in 1968.

We ask people to pick a name out of an offering plate as they come in, and to read it at the appropriate time in the alphabetical list printed in the service leaflet. This is the most stressful part of the whole enterprise for me – will all the names be read, and in the proper order? My classmates may be among the best and the brightest, but I always have a crisis of confidence at this point in the service. However, by the grace of God, it always works out. And then the Memorial Church bell tolls, twelve solemn rings.

At our last planning meeting before the reunion, in talking about the names, someone said, “well, you mean eventually there will be just one of us left, reading all the 1499 other names?” Someone else volunteered to be that one person.

But the half-joking question pointed to a deeper truth: the service becomes more and more meaningful every five years. I believe – though we don't do a head count- that more and more people attend at every reunion. Certainly, more of our classmates have died. But most centrally, perhaps, all of us bring more to the service each time... more loss, more gain, more joy and sorrow, more wisdom, generally, more fullness of life.

I believe that Jesus would say we are all more whole, with every passing five years. We are all healed, and in some mysterious ways the memorial service reflects that healing and deepens it.

Peter Gomes, the minister at Mem Church, always welcomes us at this service, and talks briefly about its meaning. He knows he is speaking to a group who may or may not attend church or synagogue, who may or may not have any theological sophistication, and he does, in non-churchy language, a brilliant job in talking about the communion of the saints. He reminds us how connected we feel to the classmates we knew who have died, and he puts those individual relationships into the context of community, and, really, of communion. That is, our sense of connection to individual loved ones translates into a larger, a transcendent connection to all the living and the dead.

A transcendent connection to all the living and the dead. To me, this is at the heart of the mystery of God. That connection is at the heart of divine life, and of human life as well. How do we translate our love of individual living souls into an ongoing love of those who have died? How does our love of the dead inform and enrich our love of the living? And how does our love of individuals translate into love of community? How does our love of communities of the living transform into love *for all the saints*? And how does our sense of connection, with and inclusion in, the communion of the saints, transform our membership in our particular, incarnate, communities?

These are the questions the feast of All Saints' raises anew for me each year. Lots of questions, and no easy or obvious answers. But let me say something individual and personal, and relate it back to my reunion experience.

Since my last reunion, my dad has died, and my mother has been overtaken, increasingly, by dementia. Since Dad died, I've been aware of certain qualities of his that I believe have been amplified in me – some confidence, some clarity, some wit; I feel as if his bodily passing released some energy of spirit that I've been able to incorporate. I've experienced this before with others whom I've loved deeply and been close to: my grandmother, my priest Dick Martin. These are my most mystical experience – intangible but very very real to me. I feel sadness and loss, but also gratitude and increased faith.

Many of my college classmates have also lost parents in the last five years, and I reckon many of them have similar outcomes – more or less consciously experienced. That transmission of spiritual qualities – that transformation of spirit – is something we bring with us when we gather together. And I believe that the

connection and healing we may feel as a result of losing loved ones helps us to feel connected with one another and more whole as a community.

We say to one another, facetiously, that we've mellowed and become more tolerant and forgiving with age and, I hope, many or most of us have - at least, those of us who venture forth to reunions. But if we have, why? Why haven't we become more rigid, judgmental, and diminished? Myself, I believe our growth and strength as a community comes, at least in part, from our mysterious participation in the communion of the saints - however we may call that larger community of the living and the dead.

We have matured as a community, not simply in age but in spirit. And that collective maturity is a mysterious gift in my belief, a gift of the Spirit.

And what I say about my class of 1968 is also true here at St. John's. We have matured as a community. We have matured, and we are always maturing. We have lost some beloved parishioners, to death, to moving, to apparently irreparable differences in understanding about our life together. Some of us have lost parents, some of us struggle with mortal illness, some of us struggle with fertility and reproductive losses, some of us, I am afraid, will suffer job losses or setbacks in the coming months, if we haven't already.

We have also achieved marvelous things together: marriage equality and our basement renovation and the welcoming of Pine Village preschool being our principal recent and outstanding missions accomplished.

We have mourned together, and we have celebrated together, and the sharing of our sorrows and joys has knit us, and continues to knit us, together, as a community of faith and a communion of the faithful.

And that connection, I believe, is at the heart of the mystery of God; the mystery that we memorialize and celebrate each week as we share the body and blood of Christ around God's table.

How do we deepen our understanding and appreciation of that connection, that continuing process of being knit together in the Spirit? How do we come to comprehend what we have gained by losing, how our struggles and failures and losses have made us stronger? How do we take our deepening spiritual maturity as a community out into the world, into the other communities to which we belong, into the neighborhood around us, into the wider world?

As Frank Fornaro suggested to us last Sunday, these are questions for prayer and discernment, not for immediate action. They are deep and enduring questions, I hope, that will bear much examination and exploration. I have faith that we will engage together in that exploration, and I look forward to that.

For now, let me close with my reading from my reunion memorial service, a passage from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
We die with the dying,
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead
See, they return, and bring us with them.
History is now...
With the drawing of this Love and the Voice of this Calling.

Alleluia! Amen