

The Communion of Saints

by

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Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

It was the title of the article that caught my eye, “Millennials are dying to talk about dying.” And it was not in some cutting edge news source or magazine. It was an article in *Presbyterians Today* about the phenomenon called The Death Café. Inspired by the work of hospice organizations, and a pastor in England named Jon Underwood, over the last decade the Death Café movement has created safe spaces for people to talk about dying. Underwood describes the concept like this: We bring people together “to increase awareness of death with a view of helping people make the most of their finite lives.” It is not so much a grief support group, but more of a discussion group where people talk about their experiences around dying family members or friends in order to process their values for living. They talk about death as an inevitable reality for every living thing.

That’s why the Death Café has also proven to attract young adults as well. You saw the young age of the protesters in Glasgow this week at the Climate Summit this week. Many of this younger generation are seriously worried about the death of whole species due to climate change; and they are less connected to religious congregations that talk more freely about matters of life and death. So, adults – young and old and in between – have found the Death Café to be a place to gather, drink tea and eat cake, to find meaning in the company of one another, and to share their responses to this common question: “How do you want to live, knowing that you are going to die?”

The leaders of this movement point to the work of anthropologist Dr. Helen Stanton Chapple who has studied American attitudes toward death. She has found that the prevailing cultural assumptions are that death is a battle to be won, rather than an inevitable biological transition to be accepted. Her work notes how many people want to deny the inevitability of death by a cycle of life-extending medical procedures, as well as an ideology of heroism that has superseded this ancient rite of passage.

She writes: “Dying has become an isolated act, rather than a generative process that invites society to live more fully into our humanity.” So meeting in churches or public libraries, the Death Café has emerged as a place where people talk about death as a means to become more alive in their living.¹

I found myself intrigued to read about the Death Café movement as a phenomenon because it has deep resonance with the ministry of the church. In classes and discussions, we search for deepened meaning in life, and certainly in the liturgy and hymnody of worship we are forever reminding ourselves that “in life and in death we belong to God.” We are accustomed to acknowledging the thin place that death can be for us whenever we recite the creed saying, “I believe in the communion of saints.” And no Sunday of the Christian year makes this more apparent than on All Saints Sunday when we recall the names of the saints who have died during the last year.

We recall them to our memory. We celebrate their lives and what they meant to us. And, we find meaning for the living of our days trusting that by the grace and mercy of God – we are united with them in some mysterious way that is also very real. As you know, the whole Book of the Revelation to John is a wild ride through apocalyptic literature, deeply symbolic, originally written to shore up and encourage Christians suffering severe persecution.

The reading before us today is that beautiful vision intended to comfort hurting people. It affirms that the work of Christ’s resurrection signals a decisive way in which God will reign over all of creation and all of time. Counter to any other apocalyptic vision of rapture when the living are imagined as being swept up in the air; here we are promised that God comes down; God makes a home among mortals and God *will*

¹ “The Death Café Phenomenon,” Presbyterians Today, April/May, 2018. from The Pseudonyms of God, (Westminster Press, 1972), pages 158-159

wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more because God is making all things new.

There is something profoundly ecological about this vision. God comes down. The imperial domination of earthly powers who create unjust social orders, who hurt and persecute will end. There is nothing about death itself to make us afraid, for on that glorious day of resurrection all things are made new. In the meantime, we believe in the Communion of Saints – which means – we entrust them to God’s eternal care; but not only that, we are also mysteriously, beautifully, related to them. As the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on.

No one has described this better than theologian Robert McAfee Brown. After the sudden death of his dear friend and colleague on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, David Roberts, Brown wrote about how he had come to understand what it means when we say: “I believe in the communion of saints.”

He wrote, this affirmation – belief in the communion of saints, “more than anything else has taken away the sting of David’s death, insofar as that is possible. I do no more than record my newfound conviction, given me by the grace of God and by David, that the occasional sense of communion I had with David in his former life has been replaced by an almost piercing sense of his nearness in his new life. The fact that we are no longer related at particular points in time somehow means now that we can be related at every point, at all times. I used to be conscious of him in his office or his classroom or as he sat in chapel – now I am conscious of him in my office, in my classroom, as I sit in chapel. I do not mean this in any ghostly sense; I lay claim to no visions. I do mean that my relationship with David has incredible new dimensions . . . I have the strange and wonderful feeling that I get to know him better each day, and that far from his death diminishing his

influence over my life, his death means that his true and lasting influence has just begun.”²

Friends, the glorious vision of Revelation keeps us in communion with the saints. Our ultimate salvation is not envisioned as a return to Eden or a retreat back to nature, but as a city full of people! An urban scene, fully populated, teeming and inhabited, and brimming with relationships, where all that was painful is redeemed and all that was broken made new.

And in the meantime, as in a Death Café, when we recall the Communion of Saints to our memory, we discover meaning For the living of our days. Their witness invites us to give answer to this religiously important meaning-making question: “How do you want to live, knowing that you are going to die?”

AMEN.

² Robert McAfee Brown, *The Pseudonyms of God*, (Westminster Press, 1972), pages 158-159