

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Year A

November 6, 2011

Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

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This past Friday night I attended the All Saints concert performed by the National Lutheran Choir in the Cities. The church was aglow with candlelight in the darkened sanctuary. At the beginning of the concert, the choir filed down two side aisles, from front to back, so that all of us in the audience were surrounded by the singers. As they began to sing, the names of those who had died, who had connections with the choir members, were read. It was as though we were surrounded by all of those who had gone before us. I thought of one of my favorite of all scripture passages from Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings to us closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:1-2a)

Earlier in the week, I had gone to the Cities to attend the annual Missional Consultation at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, which ended yesterday afternoon. The focus of the Consultation was ministry to, with, and among children and young people in their first third of life. During the opening worship, we were invited to write on a post-it note the names of some of the young people we carried with us in our hearts. I wrote the names of our three young people who were confirmed last Sunday, the three young people who will travel to the National Youth Gathering in New Orleans next summer, our youth brass ensemble who are playing this morning, the core of our high school leadership, the two high school youth not from our congregation who have been participating in some of our programs who have been brought by their friends, and finally the child to be baptized at the font this morning. Then all 200-or-so of us were invited to stick our post-it notes on the wall somewhere in the room. We were literally surrounded by hundreds of names of young people whom we had carried with us to be with us in our hearts and on our minds.

Again, I thought of the cloud of witnesses, but these witnesses are still with us. During the closing worship service yesterday afternoon, we took all those post-it notes off the walls, different ones from the one each of us had posted, and we prayed for those hundreds of young people aloud by name, all at the same time. It was a Pentecost experience.

I'd like to transfer the experience of that prayer for those young people represented on those post-it notes to our setting. We are called to pass on the faith. We have made specific promises to all the children baptized at this font through the years to nurture our

young people in the faith, as well as to assist the parents to do so. Research tells us that the most important factor in the faith development of young people is the faith of their parents. Research also tells us that having faithful adults outside their families is a very significant factor in a young person's faith development.

Let's imagine that Pentecost-like experience of praying aloud the names of those hundreds of young people being lived out here at Concordia every Sunday and all the days in between. I don't mean literally praying aloud for each of them each day—though that would be a wonderful thing—but that there would be faithful adults connected with each young person in the congregation in an accountable, meaningful relationship of faith mentoring. What would it look like if every young person in this congregation had two adult faith mentors accompanying them on their faith journey together?

Today we see all these candles burning. Each represents the life of a loved one who has gone before us. Each was a beloved child of God. The candles burn in their memory, and the flame represents the light of Christ that shone through their lives.

This morning at the baptismal font another candle will be lit. This candle will be accompanied by the words, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." This candle also represents the light and love of Christ.

Our liturgy today is framed by light—the light given at the baptismal font declaring that this one is a beloved child of God, as the Apostle John declared in our Second Lesson for today—and the light of the candles burning at the altar, the light that represents that our loved ones have been received into the merciful arms of our Lord.

The Apostle John writes of those who have gone before us:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb [that is Christ]. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:13-17)

These are the cloud of witnesses who surround us, including those represented by the many candles burning brightly before us. And they encourage all of us—including little Colby and his sister, Payton, and their parents—as we run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Thanks be to God!