

BLESSINGS

by

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

November 6, 2011

(Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost)

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Texts:

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and Matthew 25:1-13

Revelation 7:9-17

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 and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

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. 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."

I read a story about a classroom teacher of high school students in a large urban school district. Before he ever teaches anything about the subject matter of the class, he teaches the students that he hopes that they will primarily learn how to live in a complex and often confusing world. So at the beginning of class every year, the first order of business is for the students to draw up a social contract. Before any assignment is given, they settle the questions:

How shall we relate to one another in this school?

How shall we treat each other?

Which person or group is it OK to put down or make fun of or pick on? To bully?

The students given that opportunity with the guidance of the teacher arrive at very just and fair and respectful ways of relating to one another. Before homework is given, class has nevertheless already started.

How shall we live with one another?

What are the consequences when someone breaks the rules?

One of the consequences in the past, for instance, has been that when someone puts down another student, that student has to give three “put ups” to make up for it, that is to say publically three positive things about the one who has been put down. Positive reinforcement affects all people in a positive way. Since we are in this together, how shall we define how we relate to one another? School can be a tough place, but one class will be different and, hopefully, influence others.

What a great model for the church. That is what we should be doing, defining, setting the ground rules for how we should live with one another, first of all within the church for ourselves. But if we do that right, we should be having an influence on the tough world around us. If we really do believe that God blesses the mournful, the meek, and the merciful, as well as the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted, then let’s live that way, as a blessing to other people. Our best witness is to decide to set the agenda for ourselves to live with each other and all people in the way of Christ. That’s not easy in a tough world, but it is a place to start and to remember every day that that is the agenda we have agreed to.

All Saints’ Day is the day that we remember all those in our past who have lived and died as a faithful witness to the way of Christ. All Saints’ Day is always November 1, and we celebrate it on the Sunday nearest that day. The Old English word is All Hallows Day from which we get Hallows Eve Day or Halloween on October 31. Though some contemporary aspects of Halloween are not so positive, the earliest vestiges were simply ways for ancient cultures to try to understand the

meaning of death. Our All Saints' Day interprets the meaning of death in light of our Christian faith. You may know that the church actually has two days: All Saints' Day on November 1 and All Souls' Day on November 2. All Saints Day was originally for those who had been martyred, who had died because of persecution. All Souls' Day was for all Christians who had died in the faith. Most Protestant churches, and to a certain degree even the Catholic Church, now blend these two days into one. We celebrate All Saints' Day to remember especially the loved ones of this congregation and your loved ones not of this congregation who have died in the faith.

It is interesting to note that when martyrs were originally remembered on this day, the word martyr simply meant witness. Because of persecution in our faith history, simple witnesses to the faith were often put to death. The text from the Revelation speaks about a time of intense persecution and envisions a great multitude that no one can count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Lamb of God. Their bloody garments have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and miraculously made pure and clean. Who are these people the text asks? We are told that they are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal.

The immediate context of the book of Revelation is the intense persecution of Christians and Jews by the Roman Empire. Many indeed had given their life because of their faith. The word in the old King James Version of the Bible is not the great ordeal but the great tribulation. Tribulation is a better word really. It means "grind-
..... *tribulum*, which was the threshing mallet used to beat the stems and husks of the grain until it was pulverized. Those who had come through the great tribulation were and are those who have been ground down by life. In the vision, they are alive again and vibrant in the presence of God's eternity. That is our ministry still today that in the name of Christ, all who have been ground down by life might become alive and vibrant again.

All Saints' Day is not only about the past but about the future. We remember and give thanks for the lives of those who have lived before us. But we have a great

vision of the future through God's eternity. The witness of those who have lived before us as well as the vision of a great multitude from every tribe and people and language helps us to set the agenda of how we will live with each other in God's wide world in our present. We commit ourselves again this day to the way of Christ. Our agenda for the present is found by the witness of the past and the vision of the future. All people are blessed when we set our agenda as the way of Christ.

Please stand as we remember the names of those in our congregation who have died since last All Saints' Day.

Helen Barnard	Grace Henry
Edwin Andrew Beauchamp	Alf Klaveness
Lennard Rice Blanton, Jr.	Lela Mae Klaveness
Helen Brakebill	Janet Krzykowski
Dorothy Nell McAdams Bridges	Margaret Jeanne Lenox
Margaret Gready Bybee	Stephen Lieb
Grace Catherine Carlin	Charlotte Elizabeth McMahan
Mary Frances Carlin	Virginia E. Mills
Terry Jay Carnish	Terrence Riley
Robert Gentry	Jerry Sadler
Henry Goodwin Glass	Earl B. Schell