

“I Believe in the Communion of Saints”

1 John 3:1-2; Revelation 7:9. 15-17

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Last week I went to Green Lake, Wisconsin to put the boat away for the winter—an annual journey I usually make alone. There’s a farm outside the village of Cambria where the owner, an old family friend, lets me put our boat in his barn. It’s a bittersweet task, with another summer gone and the windswept leaves of October swirling around my feet as I make the final adjustments to the boat, remembering slow August cruises as the stars came out. But now the Hunter’s Moon has risen, and Orion the Huntsman dominates the sky, with snow in the forecast...

Knowing this was All Saints’ Day, I took a side trip through the town in the valley my dad grew up in, heading up to the hilltop cemetery where much of the Roberts’ side of my family is buried. Up on the hill, a cold wind was blowing as I stopped beside the graves of my grandparents, Claude and Helen Roberts. Claude ran the bank in Cambria and Helen taught piano to the village children. She played the organ each Sunday at the Cambria Presbyterian Church where her father once served as Pastor. Back in the 40s, Grandpa built a small cottage by the Lake when Dad was serving in the South Pacific. When the war was over, Dad proposed to my mother there in that cottage, beside the fireplace on Christmas Eve. If it weren’t for all that, I would never have come to know and love Green Lake—or my children and grandchildren, either.

It’s funny—the things you can learn in a cemetery. I’d forgotten that Grannie and Grandpa were buried next to her parents: the Rev. Warren and Laura Goff. They had four daughters—but they also had a son named Newell, who died in his teens in the winter of 1920. It must have been the Spanish Flu that took him, just over a century ago when another pandemic was scourging the world. I’d forgotten all about Newell, but there was his little gravestone, with the words, “Our Only Son” and “God Will Take Care of Me” engraved upon it. Even after all this time, I could still feel the grief my great grandparents lived through, as if that small stone marker was still wet with their tears.

What is it to be human? What makes us distinct out of all Creation? Is it not the fact that we weep? The scriptures say we are made in God’s image. Does God weep, too?

Jesus wept. He wept over the City. He wept over the grave of his friend Lazarus. And then he raised him from the dead.

The Evangelist tells us that we are God’s children, we who look to the One who bears our sins and sorrows. He tells us that God loves us like a parent. He tells us God calls us his own with the same passion I saw written on Newell’s gravestone. Our names are written on the palm of God’s hand. But the message doesn’t stop with that.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed.”

Will be? Oh, yes. Because life doesn't end with death. John the Evangelist continues: "What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

In the Book of Revelation, we are given a glimpse of what is promised in 1 John 3. John has a vision of heaven, where all the saints, young and old, of every race and nation, their number beyond measure, are gathered together around the Throne of God. They are dressed in white—as brilliantly as Jesus was in his Transfiguration on the mountaintop, and they are singing. Their sorrows and suffering are over. God is taking care of them.

The Lamb is there also, Christ Crucified, there at the very Center of God's Throne, but now the Lamb has become the Good Shepherd, leading His flock to springs of clear, running water, where God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

What kind of God does that? When was the last time someone did that for you? Was it your own mother or father? Can you envision God taking care of you with the same tenderness, gentleness and compassion? Or are you still holding your tears inside, waiting to be shed? John's vision fills me with a joy that needs no words to express. It's the same joy I feel when I turn the latch to our family cottage and step inside, and see the pictures of my parents and grandparents hanging on the wall, welcoming me with smiling faces.

I believe in the Communion of Saints.

Our dear ones are nearer than we think, tied to us with bonds which can never be broken. Their love is a part of God's love. And the Kingdom of Heaven stoops down to kiss us here on earth...

There is another place in the Bible where God wipes our tears away: in the Book of Isaiah, on the Mountain of the Lord. A great feast is taking place there, a feast for all peoples, with rich food and fine wines. The veil of death is being pulled away; the disgrace of God's people is being taken away; and the Lord is wiping away the tears from all faces.

Friends, on this All Saints' Day, let us come to this same Feast and Table, trusting that God will take care of us. The world has always been an uncertain landscape, riven by valleys of shadow. Yet we too are the Saints of God—just without the white robes. And we have a Shepherd, Jesus, who will lead us to springs of living water where we will lie down in safety.

God will take care of us.

And God will help us take care of each other, here in this Vale of Tears, until the tears of every mother's child are wiped dry, and everyone finds shelter, and no one goes hungry or thirsty again.

Come, Lord Jesus.

We want to be like you.

We want to see you as you are.