

Unknown Saints

Revelation 7:9-17

Andy Warhol, the pop artist, is alleged to have said, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” Like almost everything else, when I double checked this quote online, I found people doubting that he had ever said it, but the concept remains true. Fame, from media or memes, is fleeting.

That doesn't stop people from chasing fame, hoping it will bring them fortune. Now we even have people famous just for being famous. People are able to make a living as an “influencer,” using their social media fame to advertise and market products or services in a way that's more effective than traditional commercials.

Today, though, we're reminded that not everyone gets to be famous, not everyone gets to be remembered by history. But that's not the important thing. It's not important to be famous; it's important to be remembered and known by God.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, a day that can sometimes be gloomy and mournful in the life of the Church. After all, this is the day that we remember and mourn those who have gone before us to be with the Lord, awaiting the great and final Day of Resurrection. We still mourn, especially those whose loss is fresh and recent, although grief isn't linear or simple. But we may rejoice that they are with God.

In the reading from Revelation, in the great vision of heaven, we see a great multitude every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, clothed in white robes. Their robes are white because of the blood of the Lamb, because of the redemptive work of Jesus on the cross. Because of the grace of God, they have been made clean. This picture of heaven shows

us that God's grace, God's redemptive work, is not based on anything but the work of Jesus. We celebrate saints today not because what they did made them holy, but because of what Jesus did made them holy.

While the book of Revelation gets a bad rap for its confusing and frightening imagery, it's actually a picture of hope. It was written not to discourage the Christians living under the threat of persecution at the end of the first century, but to encourage them. If they knew the ending, if they knew how things would turn out, they would be able to face even great tribulation. The Great Tribulation is not what we've been going through during the pandemic. It's not even limited to the suffering endured by the Christians John wrote the book of Revelation to. It means the suffering through which the children of God in all ages pass before they enter into the eternal kingdom of God.

Since every Christian experiences tests of faith and witness, every such trial points to the future great tribulation. The picture of eternal glory of Revelation 7:14 is for the comfort of all Christians of all times as they experience whatever tribulations test their faith and patience.

That is the picture of heaven. That is what we are to think of when we go through our own times of trials and tribulations. Just as these ordinary people, unknown to us but known to God, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in their common faith, so we, too, are saved by the blood of Jesus and brought together in our common faith. It is a source of great encouragement when we need to be encouraged.

Author Frederick Buechner reminds us, though, that “on All Saints' Day, it is not just the saints of the church that we should remember in our prayers, but all the foolish ones and wise ones, the shy ones and overbearing ones, the broken ones and whole ones, the despots and tosspots and crackpots of our lives who, one way or another, have been our particular fathers and mothers and saints, and whom we loved without knowing we loved them and by whom we were helped to whatever little we may have, or ever hope to have, of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own.”

In just a few short months, we'll enter into the season of Advent as we prepare for Christmas. The figure we meet who helps us prepare for the coming of Jesus is John the Baptist. He didn't want to be known for himself. He wanted to be known for pointing others to Jesus. “I must decrease, so he can increase” (John 3:30).

The Christian band Casting Crowns has a song titled “Only Jesus” that gets at this idea, too. The chorus goes, “And I, I don't want to leave a legacy/ I don't care if they remember me/ Only Jesus.” We may want to be known, to be famous, to be remembered. What matters the most is that we are known by God.

A few weeks ago, there were people walking around campus wearing robes. Normally reserved for graduation ceremonies at the end of the fall or spring semesters, an extra graduation ceremony was held to make up for those who hadn't been able to have the graduation ceremony in person because of the pandemic. When you go to a graduation, though, you'll often see something happen that shows our dependence on others. Instead of just having the graduating students stand, the school officials will often have parents and grandparents, family and friends stand to recognize their support. While a student

graduating comes through how they do on their papers and tests by themselves, they don't do it alone. It is only with the help, support, and encouragement of family and friends that students can be successful. They may not be known to everyone, but they are known to those they helped.

We have some rotating photo boards in the narthex in the back of the church, with pictures from the 80 plus years of Memorial's history. Every time the photos are changed, people gather around, looking to see who they recognize. Some people are easily recognized. Some of the older pictures, though, few people recognize. They may be unknown to us now, but they are known to God.

The great multitude in heaven is our reason to rejoice: all the holy ones of God gathered together in one place, unknown to us but known to God, all the sinner-saints forgiven by the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, all believers in Christ singing and celebrating the grace of God and the goodness of the one who turns our mourning into dancing and our weeping into joy

That's what we look forward to. We look forward to joining the countless crowd in white robes, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We look forward to when every sad thing will be made untrue. We look forward to when every tear will be wiped away. We look forward to joy that will never go away. The joy that comes from being a saint, known by God.

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