

November 1, 2015
The National Presbyterian Church
"Where Everyone Knows Your Name!"
Psalm 139:1-4; 13-15; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 21:1-6; Hebrews 12:1-3

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Today is All Saints Sunday. This is a day in which we remember specific people we have known and loved who have been a part of our families and who have been a part of our church family, especially those who passed on into heaven in the past year. We do this, we remember these people, not only because we love them but because from a biblical point of view we still belong to them, and they belong to us. As Christians we believe in what we call "the communion of saints." We use this phrase when we say the Apostles Creed: we say that we believe in "the communion of saints." This phrase expresses a connection that we have to other believers that transcends space and time, and even death itself.

And this is a connection the Bible speaks of. It speaks of it using different images, like the images of stones in a house, or a nation of peoples, used in our Scripture passages from 1 Peter. That is, we're reminded in Scripture not only of the amazing fact that God calls us into a one-on-one relationship with God, loved by God as if there were no other in his eyes: just "God and me"; and this is true, a remarkable truth told repeatedly in the Scriptures – but it's balanced all the way through with a message we sometimes miss that God's passion is also to know us and relate to us as a community of people.

Revelation 21. So, in the book of Revelation, for example, we hear of the church spoken of in terms, not just of individual citizens, but of a city. Not a city at its worst but a city at its best; a vibrant community of people with lives that are intertwined, in which there's a synergy, an energy, so that when people work together they produce marvelous things that would not happen if we simply lived all alone and by ourselves. The city is called in Revelation the "New Jerusalem," and you and I are a part of this city.

1 Peter 2. Or we think of the image which is there in First Peter chapter two, which speaks about our lives being part of a house that God wants to build; a house not built with bricks and mortar but with our lives, as if of our lives are to be laid side by side with each other, or on top of each other, interconnected with each other so that together we form a community in which God is present. This house ends up being a temple – a house for God to live in, where God is found. This house is a place of reconciliation where, as in the temple in Jerusalem in ancient Israel, lives are reconciled to God and where lives are reconciled to one another. First Peter calls us to perform "spiritual sacrifices," and sacrifices are the means by which broken relationships are restored. So this is our calling to live in such a community and to build with our lives such a house such a place of refuge such a place for God and for one another as this.

Hebrews 12. Or we move on to those brief verses at the beginning of Hebrews 12, which speaks about God's community, not in terms of a city, and not in terms of a temple, but in terms of a sports stadium that is filled with people. This image goes all the way back to the ancient Greek games (like the Olympic Games or the Isthmian Games in the city of Corinth) held in a Greek or Roman style of amphitheater. And this amphitheater is filled with people, absolutely packed with people, and the people who are in this amphitheater, who are in the stands, are all the saints in heaven: imperfect followers of Jesus Christ, saved through grace, like you and me. They are all packed in, they're crowded in, in the biggest stadium you could ever imagine! And you and I are down on the field, we're down on the track, with this huge crowd of saints in heaven watching us. And they're not just watching us passively, but they're cheering us on.

Hebrews Chapter 12 was written (indeed the whole of the letter to the Hebrews was written) to encourage Christians who were struggling, who were finding the life of Christian faith to be hard and difficult. So they had begun to backpedal, feeling like quitting, and Hebrews 12 specifically challenges those struggling Christians, and you and me, to find strength and energy by remembering the saints:

- remembering those who have gone before us in following Christ
- remembering that they remember us; remembering that they never forget us,
- remembering that they are on the edge of their seats cheering us on, passionate that our lives would be successful, that the life of faith which we began with Jesus Christ would reach its perfect completion
- Challenging us; remembering us; urging us on.

Think for a moment about how remarkable it is that you and I should know, not all of us, perhaps, but many of us, the same sports players all across the world. There are names like Serena Williams in tennis or LeBron James in basketball that millions, in fact billions, of people know. If we were in Europe or elsewhere we (and perhaps some of you) would know the name Lionel Messi, a soccer player, known by millions of people who watch him play. These people are famous – and we are a part of the crowd in the stadium (well on the television) “looking down on them.” The image that we have in Hebrews is of your life and my life being known by far more people than know and watch them: by the whole company of the saints: they know us they remember us they never forget us. This is quite a thought.

In fact I believe it's a very, very important thought which is fundamental to the good news of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's ultimately related to the significance or, to make the point more graphic, to the potential insignificance of your life and mine.

To put it negatively from a human point of view the book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that in a generation or two all of us, except for a very few whose names may make it into a history book somewhere, almost all of us will be forgotten. It just takes a few generations for this to happen, says Ecclesiastes (2:15-17) for our lives and for our names to fade away into history (though all this is changing with Ancestry.com, which brings their names back to life again!!). But Ecclesiastes forces the question correctly: *“If we're going to be forgotten, if it takes just a few*

generations and then nobody will remember who we are, what does it all add up to? What's the meaning and what's the significance of our lives when there is nobody interested in who we are or remembers what we have done? Nobody there to remember us no matter what we've achieved?" A generation or two says Ecclesiastes and it's gone.

This is the same kind of question asked in the 2014 movie called *Still Alice*. In the movie (in which Julianne Moore won an Oscar for her performance of Alice), Alice was a brilliant professor diagnosed with the early onset of Alzheimer's. To begin with the question dealt with in the movie has to do with "who we are when our memories begin to go": when we can no longer remember people or no longer remember those things which are integral to our profession or to our skill? When we can't even remember what it is that we do? When cannot remember the knowledge and expertise we built up over many years? Who are we when our memory goes?

That's the question with which the movie begins. But by the end of the movie there's a subtle shift. The question has changed. The question is different, and has to do not with the memory of the patient which is being lost but with the memories and the remembrances of family and friends which are being lost as well. Who do we become, what is our significance, when we are forgotten, and no longer part of the daily lives of others? When even those closest to us, not out of any malice, find their lives moving on and our lives moving away from them, leaving perhaps only one or two caretakers who remember us? The others are busy. Necessarily so. They've got careers to pursue, and families to raise. Who are we then when there's nobody left with us and we seem to be all forgotten?

Now this is pretty bleak. This is a heavy thought for us to think about and to handle, so let me turn things around to the other side of the coin and remind us of something which is much brighter than this – the other side of the coin which points to the fact that when we are remembered when we are not forgotten, but somebody calls out our name: isn't that the core of joy? Great joy in the middle of a crowd!! And we really can, strangely, feel lost in a crowd, as if we were no one, small, insignificant . . . and then we hear our name called out; the call may not be for us but we hope it is! We turn around because we want it to be for us! We come alive, we find significance in the simple, calling out, remembering of our name. Such a simple experience of being remembered: *"I can't believe you remembered me! You remember my name; you welcomed me even after I'd blown it. I can't believe you did that. I can't believe you said that I can't believe you opened the door and let me in. Thank you!"*

Some of you may remember the television comedy series called Cheers which ran for about 11 years from the early 80s through the early 90s. Its storyline is of a bar set in Boston and this bar is a place where a community begins to be developed a certain kind of a communion (not around the drink we have at this table here, but around a different kind of a drink). This bar is run by a man by the name of Sam Malone played by Ted Danson. Sam has had a career as a professional baseball player but because of alcohol he blew it, and opened up the bar. Sam Malone's life is not as it ought to be, but a community begins to form in his bar with people carrying one burden or sorrow or another. One of these people is Diane, the barmaid. Her life has

been messed up by a fiancé who has left her; she's not quite sure what to do with her life even though she is educated and has opportunities. Then Norm enters into the picture. Norm is struggling with his marriage. He loves his wife, but his marriage is hard, and so is work. He's an accountant, but he goes from one job to another. And then there's Cliff, who unwittingly keeps saying things that annoy other people enormously. Sometimes it's the wrong thing: he's just plain mistaken. Sometimes it's confusing, and people can't figure out what he's saying. Sometimes he's so frustrating that people just have to leave the conversation and walk away. All of this, though, is okay in Sam Malone's place because everybody is in the same boat. It's a place where as the theme music puts it "*where people are glad you came*"; genuinely glad you came, where "*your troubles are all the same, and everybody knows your name.*" And that's it. And the whole story year after year is built around this theme of imperfection and belonging; as if the writers knew that there was a hungering and a thirsting for a communion or a community like that.

Sam's bar is not too different (going from pop-culture to something a little more highbrow), from the farmhouse of Mary and Warren in Robert Frost's long poem called "The Death of the Hired Man." The poem is really a story about Mary and Warren and a man by the name of Silas, a hired farm hand who worked for Warren, but who was always quitting at the wrong time (before the harvest was over, for example!). Warren is mad with Silas, but at the same time he loves him! The two things go hand in hand, as the poem reveals.

Silas has been away from the farm, but then out of the blue returns. He's discovered that something's wrong with his health. He's ill, and perhaps he even knows that he is going to die, and he has to find a place that he can call home, that he can go to in this time of his need. He has a brother, and he could go to his brother but he doesn't. He chooses to go back to the farm to Mary and to Warren. The poem is long; I won't read it all to you but let me read a brief (edited) excerpt which goes like this:

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren.
When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway
with the news
And put him on his guard.
'Silas is back.'
'Be kind,' she said.
'When was I ever anything
but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back,'
'I told him so last year
when we brought in the hay, didn't I?
If he left then, I said, that ended it.

‘Sh! not so loud: he’ll hear you,’ Mary said.
 ‘I want him to: he’ll have to -- soon or late.’
 ‘He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove.
 When I came up from Rowe’s I found him here,
 Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep
 . . . I dragged him to the house, Poor Silas,
 so concerned for other folk,
 -- And nothing to look backward to with pride,
 -- And nothing to look forward to with hope
 ‘Warren,’ she said, ‘he has come home-- to die:
 You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.’
 ‘Home,’ he mocked gently.
 ‘Yes, what else but home?
 It all depends on what you mean by home.
 Of course he’s nothing to us, -- any more
 Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
 Out of the woods,
 worn out upon the trail.’
 ‘*Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
 They have to take you in.*’
 ‘I should have called it,
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.

‘Has Silas better claim on us you think
 Than on his brother? “Why didn’t he go there?
 His brother’s rich,
 A somebody—director in the bank.
 I wonder what’s between them.”
 ‘I can tell you.’ Said Mary
 Silas is what he is—we wouldn’t mind him
 — But [he’s] just the kind that kinsfolk can’t abide.
 He never did a thing so very bad.
 He don’t know why he isn’t quite as good as anyone.
 -- Worthless though he is, he won’t be made ashamed to please his brother.’
 ‘I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone.’
 Said Warren
 ‘No, but he hurt my heart , said Mary,
 the way he lay and rolled his old head
 on that sharp-edged chair-back.

Warren goes in to see Silas; and finds him in front of the stove -- dead. BUT In a place, that for all his flaws, he’s known, and welcomed, and loved. Community

One of the great truths of the gospel, essential truths of the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ, is that God knows us by name and will never forget us. He’ll remember us for all eternity even though others may forget us. Even though they may live and they may die and they are

gone, God will never ever forget us. And it's this welcoming and this remembering of God that gives to our lives eternal significance eternal significance that nothing and nothing no one no forgetfulness can ever take away.

Psalms 139 I think speaks of this knowledge of God of your life and mine more beautifully perhaps and poignantly and directly than any other place in Scripture:

O Lord, you have searched me you've searched me. [The God the God of the universe, of possibly multiple universes, has found it worth his while to 'search me and know me'!!].
You know when I sit down and when I rise up,
You discern my thoughts from far away,
You search out my path and my lying down
And are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
For it was you who formed my inward parts
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

God knows us intimately and eternally from the beginning, on to the end, and beyond the end; on forever and ever. And he calls us, as those who have been blessed to be known and remembered and given significance, to build a community that reflects his knowledge of us, his knowing of us. He calls us to build his church, a reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven, a reflection of the Communion of Saints in flesh and blood, right here and now, so that people can see and feel this experience of knowing and being known, this remembering and being remembered, this sense of belonging and embrace, never forgetting and never forgotten.

The call is to build a church community which is like a city at its best in which there is such an integration of our lives with one another that marvelous things begin to happen; there is a synergy there; there is an energy there; there is a creativity there which is powerful. And God is at work in the midst of it: a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, right here and now on earth. This call is for the church to be like a city.

And for the church also to be, as 1 Peter says, like a temple to which we come; not just a space like this church building, but a community in which we sense the presence of God. A community where, because God longs to be here, reconciliation takes place, Sunday after Sunday; reconciliation between your life and my life, and between God's life and our lives.

This community, the church, is to be like the stadium described in Hebrews, where we not only remember each other here on earth (shifting the imagery a little bit: we're all in the stands, cheering each other on, as if there is only one person down there on the ground); our job is not to criticize or condemn but to cheer others on, who like us are struggling to run the race with perseverance. And so we do this together: we remember this vital connection down here on earth and we add to it the connection we have for all eternity with those who have run the race before us, the communion we have with the saints who've gone ahead of us.

To be sure we grieve for them and our grief is real: the Scriptures tell us to grieve, grieve say the Scriptures but do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Do not forget not only those who have come before us, but do not forget that they are more alive than we are! By the power of Christ's resurrection they are more alive than we are. Indeed they are filled with energy; they are on the edge of their seats in this stadium, and they are cheering us on. There is no passive crowd when the World Series is being played. There is energy in the crowd and that energy affects those on the field. And those who have gone before us are on the edge of their seats remembering who we are, even as we remember them, cheering us on that we would live lives that are faithful to Jesus Christ as long as there is breath within us.

Thank God for the Communion of Saints and the call of God through Jesus Christ to live in relationship with God, not just one-on-one but in a community in which we can experience the power of all kinds of lives around us remembering us, challenging us to remember others, giving us significance, and changing who we are, for good and for God.

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