

The One Family

A homily preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 31, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Today is a very special day in the life of our church. Today, on this All Hallows Eve, we remember with gratitude those whom we have loved who have gone before, and who now live in Eternal light. As the Apostle Paul puts it,

*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.*
(I Corinthians 2:9, NRSV)

But for all this beauty and joy beyond the walls of the world, it is still hard to talk about, even in church. Even the sweetest memories sting with the pain of loss. And all that with not even bringing up the inexorable fact of our own mortality. But numerous Christian traditions, including the Celtic tradition on which we draw so much today, would teach us that it is *important* that we be *able* to talk about it, and ultimately find in it hope and strength for living now.

The ancient Celts, both before and after the arrival of Christianity, believed that *this* day is unique in the calendar, for it is the day that the barrier dividing the material world from the spiritual world is the *thinnest*. In fact, in the very rich Irish imagination, this is where we get our Halloween traditions. It was believed that on this day spirits from the other world would break through the barrier and visit the living, which is why the practice arose of dressing up in scary costumes to scare the spirits back to the place from which they came. It was and is all good fun.

But the Celtic church also took this opportunity as a teachable moment. This concept of a “thin place” – or a thin *time* – can remind us that we, the living in this world, and those who live in God’s nearer presence, are *not* so far apart. In truth, in the Eternal Now that is God, those we love who have crossed over are *still with us* ... They *worship* with us, even now, in the Mystery of the one family in Heaven and Earth.

For as we see in the scriptures, our worship here is a *foretaste* of what, for us, is yet to come – but in the Eternity of God already is – worship around the Throne of God and of the Lamb, Christ himself, which engages every heart and enfolds them all in a singular joy that is indescribable. In that great vision of Heaven, we see a great throng –

*... 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.*

Some of us have never thought of ourselves as great singers. But if our COVID experience has taught us anything, it has taught us how much we miss singing together when we're told we can't do it, even if for very sound reasons. Something deep and visceral has been missing ... missing for a long time.

But raising my own voice in song together with you last week and today, for the first time in almost two years? I can't put in words the joy it brings me to share this with you again, and if I or we can't put *this* into words as we sit here in this simple Sanctuary on a late October Sunday morning, how much more indescribable is this eternal worship around the Throne of the Lamb – and how indescribable is that truth that we, here, in time, are one with them now in Eternity, and they with us, forever bound together in the Love of God.

It is for this reason that we invited you all to submit the names of loved ones you would like for us to read and remember as we light candles on the Communion Table – symbolizing their presence with us here in the worship of God. We have a candle on the table for each family who submitted names, but also candles for those who are named aloud by you in the next few moments. Their lights shine even now because of Christ, and so each candle on the Table will be lit from the Christ Candle, for it is Christ who is our Light and Salvation ... it is Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

As we light each candle, and speak the names of our loved ones, may we ever remember the truth of the gospel: that as “all die in Adam, so in Christ all will be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22, NRSV).