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“For All the Saints”
A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard
Joshua 3:7-9, 14, 17; Revelation 7:9-17
November 2, 2008

Every five or six years in this congregation we go through a ritual called a pictorial directory. It is not an easy task to herd together a congregation of people from all over the Triangle to sign up and then come down to the church for pictures and then to put them all together for you as a church directory. Thanks to all of you for signing up. I want to especially thank Shirley Frederick for her leadership in this effort. It is more than a directory. It is an instrument that helps us create community in this congregation, it helps us know who we are.

I bring up the pictorial directory this morning because today is a good day to pull out our directories, not just the current edition, but all those directories from past years. They are like a family photo album. They contain pictures of all those saints.

Some of the pictures that come to mind are: George Watts, Alice Hicks, Richard Vereen, Katherine Everett, Clara Mathis, David Scanlon, and Frances Shackelford. Our gallery is made up of many others who are known to us and to God. Just in this last year some of the faces that were sitting among you have joined the saints, Al Carr, Ella Fountain Pratt, Harriet Leonard, Linda Postema, Virginia Antrim and one of our associate pastors, Carter Shelly. After church, I would suggest that you go out into the Memorial Garden and read the names on the wall out there and reflect on the contributions to our lives.

That is just the local crowd. We can add names like John Calvin, Martin Luther, and Katrina Luther—you have probably never heard her name before. She was a former nun who married Martin Luther. She was strong and feisty, a partner in the Reformation. Then there is Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa—the list goes on and on—and again, many names not known to us, but known to God. *For all the saints who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed.*

I am impressed by that vision from Revelation with the length and breathe of all those saints. They come from all places, all times, all tongues, all backgrounds. We remember them because they help us to renew our strength as we continue our journey. The vision said that they had all passed through “the great ordeal,” the ordeal was different things for different ones of them. I think each one of us can talk about the great ordeals that we have gone through and are going through presently. We have our own rivers to cross as our ancestors crossed over the Jordan fearful of the Amorites and the Hittites and all the other “ites” that might have attacked them. But in faith as Homer Ashby, read for us this morning they crossed over the waters of the Jordan into the promised land.

We have our own rivers to cross. Life can be stressfulness as we face personal trials and tribulations, such as health problems or financial problems. The waters rise. There is a mood of apprehension in our nation on the eve of this election: a sagging economy, a crazy stock market, two wars. We worry about the future, worry about our financial future, about the future of our children and our grandchildren. Those all pass through the great ordeal and they are encouraging us as we face our ordeals.

What about the future of this congregation? Will we be able to find the resources again this year to carry on the ministry of this congregation in 2009? Kim and Jon Abels are leading us in that endeavor to make a commitment of our financial resources and our time and energy.

In these stressful times we are being called to remember who and whose we are, to remember that we are apart of a community that stretches across time and space and that we stand on the shoulders of others that have come before us, names that will be called out today, names that are near and dear to your hearts. They have dug the wells from which we drink. Now it is our hour, our moment, our time to be faithful to the God who has claimed us

in Jesus Christ and promised us that one day we shall all be gathered at God's table with all God's children.

Many theologians talk about what we are experiencing on this day as a "thin place". Thin places in our lives are those places where heaven and earth come close to each other. Those thin lines where for a moment we can see over, we can commune with those who have gone before us. When we know that we are in the presence of something bigger and greater and more important than our lives. When we realize that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, people who saw their way through the great ordeal and now wait on the other side. That is a thin place.

All of these people that we call the saints of the church, they are not perfect. They did not do everything right, they tripped and stumbled and often fell, but they got up and by the grace of God they ran their race.

Recently it has been revealed that one person that many people thought was one of great saints of this modern period, Mother Teresa who literally fed the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. She revealed at the end of her life that her sainthood was one that carried her through great darkness. Listen as she discusses her life's struggle.

Do not think that my spiritual life is strewn with roses. . . . Quite the contrary, I have more often as my companion "darkness."

And when the night becomes very thick—then I simply offer myself to Jesus.

. . . If I ever become a Saint—I will surely be one of "darkness."

I will continually be absent from heaven—to light the light of darkness on earth. (Mother Teresa - Come Be My Light.)

She was in one of those thin places that saw the darkness but bared in her soul the lightness. Without the saints, who knows how our lives might have turned out? From all the saints, living and dead, who have witnessed to God's presence, to that great company now gathered in the presence of God, those are the saints that we remember this morning, those are the people who inspire us to be saints too, to follow Christ and to do the best we can with what we have where we are. Not to say that sainthood is beyond our reach but to say we have the same blood running in our veins that those other saints had. It is the blood of Christ the Lamb whose life was laid down so that we might have life and be his body in this world.

So whether you give yourself an A-plus or an F-minus on sainthood, you can not take back the fact that when you were claimed in the waters of baptism God put his mark on you. The business of sainthood is God's making, God reaching out and touching our lives, using us in ways that even make us wonder is that me or is that God moving me to do something special in God's sight.

Let me suggest to you today that we are standing at a thin place, a place where we have the privilege of coming to this table and gathering around with all of the saints from across time and space. It is in these moments, we experience a thin place, that we receive the courage and the strength to continue on our journey.

I experienced a thin place several years ago, I was in a movie theater. Carlisle and I had gone to see a movie that was recommended to us called, *Places in the Heart*. It is the story of a southern widow living in a small town, trying to keep her farm together under difficult circumstances. The people who are aiding her are a blind man and an African American man, neither one had any status. In this little town many ugly things happen, a horrible racial incident, people are fighting but she hangs in there. What took me by surprise and still gives me shivers when I think about it, was the closing scene of the movie. There are a group of people gathered in a church for Sunday morning worship. As the camera scans across the congregation you see the characters in the movie sitting there together sharing the Lord's supper. Those who had literally killed each other, those at war with each other and those who had loved and supported each other.

The movie got it, that is the thin place to which you are invited today. There is a table prepared for all of God's saints throughout time and space, and they are coming to dinner with us today. Thanks be to God for this thin place called the Table of our Lord. Amen.