

Revelation 7:9-17 Pastor Bill Uetricht 11/06/11 All Saints Day

This past week I received an email from my friend Ellen seeking some insight from me regarding a phenomenon that she was noting in her work place and in our culture at large. (Both Ellen and I have a keen interest in culture observation.) She told me that at the company in which she works there is almost a preoccupation with Halloween. People there this year were going to all lengths for this one day a year celebration. And what's more, Ellen noted, there are now stores that exist simply for the sake of selling Halloween items. What is this all about, Ellen wanted me to help her think through?

My initial response was to say that in part this was the result of the affluence that our economy had been producing for a long time. People with more money will spend it on frivolous items. But then I suggested that I suspected that this was not the only reason for the growth in the emphasis on Halloween. I have to wonder if the increasing popularity of Halloween is not rooted in some kind of reaction to modernity, to modern life, modern life that has its roots in the Industrial revolution. The kind of culture that we have helped to create since the Industrial revolution is a culture in which many of us feel a little straight-jacketed. We are not always conscious of this, it seems to me, but there is a big part of our individual selves that just assumes that we are to fit in, that we are to behave appropriately, that our houses and our yards are to be manicured like the neighbors, that we are to be the company's or even the church's man or woman, that we are some kind of cogs in a giant. Modern life, especially with its increasing level of control of human behavior and with its ability to broadcast in a moment's time information about our inappropriate behavior, can be quite confining. Halloween, in a socially acceptable

way, invites us to be a little wild, to put a different mask on, to break out of the confines of the lives we live, sometimes even to mess with the dark side. Halloween allows us, even just for a short period of time, to enter a different reality.

It strikes me that it is no coincidence that the cultural holiday of Halloween happens just prior to the church's celebration of All Saints' Day. For in many ways, All Saints' Day is a day that takes us to a different reality. It speaks of wild and sometimes mind-confounding things—the resurrection of the dead, the communion of the saints. It calls forth from us great imagination.

Today we hear from the Book of Revelation. There is no more imaginative book in the Bible than Revelation. One author I was reading this past week suggested that the images we have today from Revelation help our spirits to soar, help us break out of our limited and linear ways of thinking—thinking that is oh so orderly and predictable, that can be as manicured as our lawns. Revelation today helps us to rise above that manicured thinking, beyond the life we think we know, to rise above the obvious, to see a different reality than what appears to be the facts, ma'am, just the facts.

The Book of Revelation was written for a group of Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans, people who tried to order the thought world of the early Christians. The facts for them were unsettling, scary. The facts seemed to suggest that the Romans were truly in charge, that they ran the show. But Revelation, in what is an amazingly political book, wanted and wants to insist otherwise. And it does this insisting by transporting its readers, us, to another reality. The reality is the end of time--heaven, if you will. But the trip to this reality does not serve, as Karl Marx would describe it, as an "opiate for

the people.” It does not serve to take the early Christians and us to another reality so that they can escape this reality. It takes us and them to heaven so that we can see this reality—life on earth—differently.

“After this, [the great sixth plague in which all kinds of horrible things happened], I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation and peoples and languages.” We are in a different reality, heaven, a place filled not just with our own kind, not just with people of our culture, our language, our color of skin. This is the amazingly diverse people of God who are standing before the throne of God and the throne of the Lamb, the risen Christ. They are wearing white—they are pure. They have palm branches in their hands. They are celebrating a victory, and they are calling out: “Victory (salvation) belongs to our God and to the Lamb.” Victory doesn’t belong to the Romans. Victory doesn’t belong to the oppressive powers. Victory belongs to the God who deserves all of the praise, all of the blessing, all of the honor. Those Romans may think that they run the show, but they are living in illusion land. People of faith know better.

“Who are these people, these robed-in-white folks, and where have they come from?” one of the elders of heaven wants to know. And in this flight of imagination the elder answers his own question—after all, the heavenly realm should have the answers to the questions. “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal. These are they who have washed their robes in blood and, miraculously, made those robes white.” These are the faithful martyrs, those who have given up their lives for the sake of the gospel. These are the victims of the oppressive powers. But note; these victims are the ones who are

victorious. They are the ones who are gathered around the throne of God. The real power doesn't belong to those who use it to oppress people, but to those who remain faithful to the God of love, to the God of compassion, to the Lamb that was slain.

On All Saints' Day we are transported to another reality, not so that we might escape this reality, so that we might deny it, but so that we might see it in a different light, so that we might live our lives not just on the basis of the so-called facts, on the basis of the confines that are provided by our culture. There is more to life than just what we see, what we experience, what we are told we must do and be. There is more to life than the constant barrage of activities and occurrences that seem to want to take the joy out of our lives. There is more to life than power and those who try to wield it. There is more to life than the powerful marketplace that desires to get us to bow down at its feet. There is more to life than social expectation.

At the center of life is a love that is bigger than power, that is more dependable than the market, that is more life giving than what everybody thinks we should do, that is larger even than the negative blows we receive daily, larger even than death. At the center of life is a compassion that is fully acquainted with the depths of our pain and depths of our struggles. Revelation says today that the Lamb is at the center of the throne, the Lamb is our shepherd—the slain lamb, the crucified Christ. At the center of life, in other words, is a love that shares in our pain, that gets dirty with our dirtiness, that cries our tears, that suffers with us in our suffering.

It is this kind of love that runs the show, Christians believe. It is this kind of love that life is truly about. So then, don't give up. Don't throw in the towel. Don't allow the so-called facts to be the only truth

you trust. Don't give into despair because the pain seems so overwhelming. Don't just do what everybody else does. Don't give into the powers that want to insist that life is about their or anybody's power. Be taken into the realm not of power but of love, so that you can love. Glance at the crucified Christ, the lamb that was slain, so that you can love with a love that is willing to suffer with others, that is willing to take on the pain of the world, is willing to honor, as does God, the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, those who forgive and those who heal, those who embrace peace, not violence or power.

All Saints' Day transports us to a different reality so that we can see and trust what is really real in *this* reality. Love is the really real. The saints of every time and place march in and on trusting in love. And as good as Halloween is in allowing us to be set free from the confines of modern life, love is even better. Suffering love will take us not just to what everybody else expects, not just to what the company demands, or what the culture insists on. It will take us to the land of freedom. There we won't have to hide behind masks or depend upon them. There we will simply be free . . . to love.