

The Great Makeover

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The Celebration of the Communion of Saints
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“And the one who was seated on the throne said,
'See, I am making all things new.'” – Revelation 21:5a

Yesterday in Hudson, Cheryl Goggans, Rose McIntyre, and I attended the great makeover of the Western Reserve Association at its last annual meeting. It was the last because the Western Reserve Association no longer exists. As of the vote of delegates yesterday, the churches of the WRA and the churches of the Eastern Ohio Association officially became one new association called the Living Water Association. In many ways, we've been functioning as one association for several years, and yesterday's vote simply made official what in fact has been our lived reality for some time.

Our two associations voted to merge because we had to. We simply don't have the money anymore to keep operating two shops: two association ministers, four associate association ministers, two support staffs, two lay schools, two committees on ministry, and so on. We needed to combine our resources in order to keep serving the churches that made up the two associations that covered the northeast part of the state of Ohio from the Pennsylvania line along Lake Erie west to Vermilion and south almost to Marietta. When those associations were formed sixty years ago, there were over 300 UCC churches in that big piece of real estate; today there are about 140. You can do the math and see why we voted to merge.

We had to give ourselves a makeover in order to continue serving Jesus Christ in ministry. We gave ourselves permission to carry on ministry in our time and in our significantly enlarged place in a different configuration than we had before. We voted to seek a new way of being church because the old way of being church wasn't working for us anymore. We changed who we are so that we can continue to be, as we will say in a few minutes, “the servant church of the servant Christ in whose name we rejoice to pray.”

Today we celebrate the Communion of Saints, or All Saints Sunday as it's sometimes called. It is indeed a celebration because it affirms one of the most basic realities about our lives and one of the most fundamental truths of our faith, namely, that even so great a makeover as death itself does not separate us or our loved ones from divine love. We are physically separated from our loved ones who have died, and we don't pretend that we're not, but beneath that physical reality lies the spiritual reality that because saints are those who persisted in their love for God throughout their whole lives – sometimes in the face of tremendous hardships and obstacles – we believe that we remain in communion with those saints even though they have undergone that great makeover we call death. The saints are, in a way fully understood only by God, present to us here, now, and they will be present with us in eternity when we join them at the end of our own earthly lives.

That's what we mean by the Communion of Saints. The saints are those whose souls “are in the hand of God,” as our first reading said, and we also believe and sing, “He's got the whole world in his hands.” So if the souls of the saints are in God's hands and we're part of the world that God has in his hands, then we and the saints are in the same place, namely, in God's powerful and loving hands.

And that is a cause for celebration. We get to celebrate what those saints we remembered in the litany a little while ago gave to us, our church, and our world: Bill Polkon, Roy Restel, and Joan Workman all gave us music; Scottie MacEwan returned to Faith after caring for his late wife for a number of years, and when he was in town, he rarely missed a Sunday; Freda Sonnie gave us a new and gentle presence in the pew with her friends, Joanne and Ellen.

Each of us can call to mind our own experience with those saints of this church, leaving behind those moments when neither of us was at our best, and lifting up to God all the rest. The love those saints had for God, their love for this church, our love for God, and our love for this church keeps us in communion with one another and with all the faithful, throughout time and space, and that is a cause for great celebration.

And our reading from the book of Revelation is also a cause for celebration because it, too, speaks about a great makeover – a cosmic makeover. We read about that ultimate makeover in the first half of the fifth verse of the twenty-first chapter of the book, which says this: “And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'”

God is making all things new. A new heaven and a new earth. A new you and a new me. A new America and a new Russia. A new Israel and a new Palestine. A new Cleveland and a new Detroit. It's all being made new because none of those things are yet what God intends them to be. The makeover that God has promised to bring to completion at the end of time – which is the subject of the book of Revelation and the reason we're going to be studying it in a few weeks – is, at this very moment, already underway, and you and I are a part of that great change. Being created in God's image and likeness means that we are co-creators with our creator, and accepting our discipleship as followers of Jesus means that we work to help bring to earth that realm of justice, joy, love, and peace that he said is already among us.

Most people think that the world as we know it – which is largely shaped by our exposure to media – is the only world that is or ever will be. Our Christian faith says otherwise. Our Christian faith says that there is a world to come, of which we have received glimpses, by faith, in this world. And because of those glimpses – chief among them the resurrection of Jesus the Christ – we believe that we have been given new life with which to live and work to try to make this world more closely resemble that one. Or, to put it another way, we work to try to make earth look a bit more like heaven.

And that means we Christians have to play a long game. We are in this for the long haul because we are working with a divine partner. The one seated on the throne in John's great eschatological vision is, of course, God, and our text doesn't say that the new creation is finished or that it is yet to begin. Our text says that God is in the process of making that new creation. We're not at the beginning and we're not at the end; we're in the middle – God's eternal now, as the theologian Paul Tillich put it -- where God's redemptive purposes are being worked out, however dimly those purposes may appear to us at any given moment.

We're not the first generation of believers to wonder if God has abandoned us to an indifferent universe or to our own worst selves. It would be easy to succumb to the temptation to despair. Racist marches in towns and cities all across our country. Pipe bombs sent to those who criticize the president or his supporters. A horrible massacre in a Pittsburgh synagogue.

It would be easy, in such a swirling mass of fear and anger and confusion to abandon the first principle of our faith – that we follow the one who endured suffering rather than inflicted suffering -- and by that endurance he opened up for us and for all people the gate to eternal life. That is the first principle of our Christian faith, and everything else derives from that.

That's the message of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb. That's the narrative of Jesus the Christ. Jesus changed the world, to be sure, but that change was a beginning and not an end. We still have to live with the rotten realities of life. Jesus showed us a path out of the mess, but love prevents him from forcing us to take it. The way of Jesus can only be freely chosen; it cannot be coerced. And once chosen, the way of Jesus is a commitment that requires undivided loyalty. And those who come closest to achieving that singleness of lifelong purpose we call saints, and since we aspire to what they lived, it is our membership in their communion that we celebrate today.

The saints lived and worked in the belief of God's great makeover of the world, both in their day and at the last day, and the word scholars use to describe the culmination of that makeover is eschatology. The end of the world, as we commonly refer to it, won't be starting tomorrow or Tuesday or five hundred years from now. The end has already begun with God's great makeover of the world in Jesus the Christ. The in-breaking of God's realm into the realms of this world has been underway for a very long time, and the book of Revelation shows us in wildly vivid images where that process is headed.

And it is headed toward a new heaven and a new earth, created, redeemed, and loved by God. The main reason we're going to be studying the book of Revelation during Advent is so I can help you see the great message of hope that lies at the heart of that bewildering book. Most liberal Christians like us want nothing to do with the book of Revelation – or with Christian eschatology, for that matter – because we're so afraid of being perceived as crazy fundamentalists.

But both Revelation and eschatology are important because they're both about the Christian hope – our hope – that God's will is sovereign, that God's word will be the last word, and that that word, like the one who utters it, is love.

The book of Revelation has traditionally been understood to have been written by John the evangelist, the author of the fourth gospel. Scholars have pointed out some problems with this identification, which I'll discuss a bit in our upcoming study, but I want to close today by taking us back to that fourth gospel and its famous and beautiful opening words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." That Word of God, we believe, is Jesus the Christ, in whom God's love for the whole world became incarnate. If we believe that the Word of God is love incarnate, and if we believe that God's word will be the last word, then the last word for the whole world will be love, given unreservedly, and without exceptions. That's the end toward which we believe our story moves. Is that not a cause for celebration?