

"DISSOLVED INTO SOMETHING GREATER"

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All Saints Day is about more than commemorating a long-ago church gathered unto God in eternity. It's no less about sharing the gift of Christian community, about living in fellowship, here and now. Fellowship. Now there is a loaded term.

On the shallow side, years ago a religion writer would review Sunday worship services like he was writing a Fodor's guide to churches. Each Sunday he visited a different church. On Monday he published his findings, reviewing the music, the sermon, the liturgy. Interestingly, he gave special weight to the *fellowship* he experienced. Why was this? As visitor to so many churches, the chilly reception surprised him. His angle was that Coffee Hour was the loneliest time of the week.

So the writer had a method. He planted himself in the front of the church. As worship closed, he walked to the back and then to Coffee Hour. He waited to see who greeted him. Carrying a calculator, he had a point system, so many points for a hello, so many for introductions, for asking his name, for giving him coffee, or for introducing him to the pastor. Some churches scored as few as 150 points.

The journalist was George Plagenz of the Columbus Dispatch. We knew he'd soon review our church. After all, I was the new kid in town, the fresh-faced 30 year old senior minister of a large downtown church. My associate was 58. I was a curiosity, a "person to watch in 1986", according to glossy Columbus Monthly magazine. Don't blink, anyone. It is a slippery slope from young turk to old turkey.

Because we expected Plagenz, we prepared. Sure enough, one day a Deacon spied him hiding behind a pier of that neo-Gothic cathedral. We all knew our part. We did our best, not only with conducting worship, but especially with meeting and greeting. We introduced him to everything that breathed in the building, even a few street people. Because it was summer, Coffee Hour happened outside. Plagenz was swimming in enough punch and cookies to give him hyperglycemia.

Back then my eldest Greta was 8 months old. Overheated in the humidity, she had shed her jumper. Sporting only a diaper, George Plagenz not only met the pastor that Sunday, he held his baby daughter. She was thrust into his arms. *Lord, please let her have a clean diaper!* I prayed. All the while Plagenz had no clue we had seen him a mile away. The result? Headline the next day: "First Congregational Church scores 6,000 friendly points. And the real hit was the senior pastor's sunny daughter, charming me under the spreading buckeye tree." You can't buy advertising like that. The article was nationally syndicated and he ran versions of it for years. We received copies from New Hampshire to Arizona.

Hospitality matters more than we realize, putting our newcomers at ease. What seems perfectly warm to us can feel icy to guests. But fellowship, in Plagenz's

shallow sense, can be faked. After all, we faked it on that Ohio September morn. But on All Saints Sunday, we yearn for true spiritual fellowship. It can't be faked.

Last week I was eating my lunch next door when nurse Amber Vinson spoke for five minutes at Emory Hospital. Ms. Vinson is the nurse who contracted ebola in Texas, caring for the patients there. Hospital staff gathered behind her, smiling. Family stood in the wings. This woman of science, specializing in communicable diseases, didn't invoke hard facts discussing her recovery from a lethal disease.

She spoke in a heartfelt way about what matters facing down great testing. "I am so grateful to be well, and—first and foremost—want to thank God," she began, smiling and swiping tears. "I sincerely believe that with God all things are possible," quoting Jesus, without mentioning him by name. "While the skill and dedication of the doctors, nurses and others who have taken care of me have obviously led to my recovery, it has been God's love that has truly carried my family and me through this difficult time, and has played such an important role in giving me hope and the strength to fight." That is the deeper side of fellowship. Many of you here know those depths, reaching out to the Matys family, as it matters most.

Some things are so big we aren't meant to face into them or endure them alone. Life is one. Death is another. So is every serious ordeal in between. That's what our text from Revelation says. Small, sparse, fragile churches facing down persecution from the most violent empire the world had ever known; hearing that they are part of a multitude processing toward God; from all nations and tribes, all colors and languages, together finding the confidence that God has the last word.

In her novel *My Antonia*, Willa Cather writes, "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great," That graces her headstone in Jaffrey, NH. Fellowship is bigger than feeling warm and fuzzy. It is finding our way home in a cold universe, and trusting when we go there, we'll be taken in. It's showing others the way there. And as God connects us, the power defies time and space.

It is knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. We can try to talk ourselves into believing such a great truth. But it takes community to fully mediate such a grace, like last Thursday's Flash declared: "Saints can't exist without a community, as they require, like all of us, nurturance by a people who, while often unfaithful, preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God."

Nowhere does Scripture consider it possible to be "private Christians". Nowhere is solitary faith lifted up, belonging to one apart from others. From Genesis to Revelation, we are part of God's living, breathing fellowship. We belong to God. God belongs to us. And that is our deepest chance to belong to one another. James Weldon Johnson wrote a Black musical version of Genesis and creation. In it, the Lord muses over his motives in making us. "I'm lonely," Yahweh intones, "I'm going to make me a world." Since the start, we're caught up in this together.

We aren't onlookers or observers but participants in the story. On All Saints Day we recall that we stand on the shoulders of giants, whom we name at this table. You don't even have to know the names of the people we read from this table to feel the connection, for this is your spiritual home. You are part of Revelation's great fellowship spreading out ardently before God's throne. It's having a stake in and being part of a movement much deeper than glad-handing or grinning hellos.

All Saint's Sunday honors worthy forebears in faith as it lifts up God's unbroken fellowship of mutual solidarity and eternal care. We are not alone in our troubles. We have timeless bonds fanning out in heaven and on earth. In the middle is this shared fellowship, this church, where we live together as the body of Christ. We share in the fellowship of God's healing presence, a fellowship of promise, where together with all of God's own--past, present, future--a crown of glory awaits us. Amen.