



“Connected”

Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

November 2, 2008

All Souls' Sunday

The mighty Columbia River makes a graceful u-turn as it makes its way through southeastern Washington State. At the bottom of the “u” sits my hometown, Richland. My bedroom window offered a wonderful view of the river and the place where Lewis, Clark and Sacajawea camped long, long ago. The river bottom just across the street provided a playground for the children of the neighborhood.

On the edge of the river in downtown Richland is a park where children still play, families picnic, and boats are launched. Our church held its annual church picnic at the park under stately sycamore trees that still provide shade to all who come.

In September, my brother and I took our 90-year-old mother to our hotel which was next to that old park. We sat on a patio beside the river and remembered. Jim and I remembered the wading pool in the park where we frolicked. We remembered mom hiking up her skirt and joining us. We remembered the people who picnicked with us there. Mom sat quietly listening to Jim and me laugh, talk and reminisce. It's a sacred memory I will forever cherish.

The unique scent of the Columbia created more powerful memories as people nearly forgotten came alive again. Fading events came flooding back in living color: riding my bike through flood waters in the river bottom; Paul Smith and I hunting rattle snakes with our BB guns down by the river; Pat Murphy and I fishing and then making a fire to roast hot dogs.

Sacred memories all. Memory is a wonderful and powerful force. Memories recreate the past and bring people to life. What a wonderful gift from God, whom Scripture declares is a God who remembers us.

Memory lies at the very heart of the biblical story and all biblical faith. An optional Old Testament Lesson for today tells the story of when Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Joshua told the leaders of each of the twelve tribes to grab a rock as they crossed the river and then, on the other side of the river, make a pile of those stones.

That pile of stones reminded the people that God was with them on the difficult journey to the Jordan and that God brought them over into the land of promise. But the memorial stones had a larger purpose. The memory was opportunity to teach their children about God and the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery and God's provision on the journey. Retelling the story both creates and evokes memory. In the telling, the sacred story shapes the lives of both tellers and hearers. Memories are often sacred memories.

Our Jewish sisters and brothers, who are still remembering that old story, continue to be shaped by it. The story retold is the story reenacted, even recreated, and becomes “our story.”

Better than half the New Testament is memory. Jesus' disciples remembered his life and teaching and told and retold the story. They believed the Jesus' story was more than mere story. The story bore the power of God because God sent Jesus to reveal God to us. It's a sacred story.

They remembered Jesus' words and retold them. They believed his words were sacred words bearing transforming power. Jesus' words were woven into Jesus' life, and four gospels were born. We listen to them every Sunday, and each week they continue to "do" something. We believe they are words from God.

From the first days of the Christian movement, the central acts of the community's worship are memory. In what we call the ministry of the word, Scripture is read, heard, and proclaimed, an act that retells and recreates the story.

The Eucharist, Holy Communion, remembers and reenacts Jesus' Last Supper. "Do this in memory of me," Jesus said. At the table of the Lord we encounter a mystery larger than ourselves. Here we meet the risen Lord who comes to feed us.

All we do in worship reminds us of the God we too easily forget. Worship reminds us we gather in God's presence in sacred space. Our singing, hearing, praying, partaking and conversation bear witness to the mystery that God is with us here and now. In worship we are invited to connect with the biblical story, to each other, and to God.

Here sacred memory is assisted by a room filled with memories. This room connects us to 161 years of the Christian story. What stories these pews could tell. Ordinary people and some extraordinary folks too sat in this room on these pews and were connected to God and the Christian story. Here, today, the Plymouth story continues as we write a new chapter in a long story.

We are not alone on this journey of faith. We are together in this our spiritual home. And we are connected to a larger story, Plymouth Church and the entire Christian church. In one of his masterful devotional prayers, John Baille writes,

I thank you that this Christian way whereon I walk is no untried or uncharted road, but a road beaten hard by the footsteps of saints, apostles, prophets, and martyrs. I thank you for the finger-posts and danger-signals with which it is marked at every turning and which may be known to me through the Bible...and all of history. Beyond all I give you...thanks for the great gift of Christ, the pioneer of our faith...I thank you that I am not called upon to face any temptation or trial which he did not first endure.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should fail to profit by these great memories of the ages that are gone by....

The church has a name for this connection with time and eternity: "The Communion of Saints." All Souls' Sunday celebrates our connection to God and God's people through the ages and around the world.

The Epistle Lesson, Revelation 7, is a vision of eternity. The vision points at a vast multitude of people, people from every tribe, tongue, nation and race. The members of this multitude are called "saints." Not those extraordinary saints who earn the title "Saint," but ordinary people being transformed by God into a new kind of people. This new people is, above all, a worshipping people deeply connected to God and to each other.

We belong to that mysterious multitude and when taken seriously, it's a transforming experience. But it takes some remembering – and worshipping and re-forming.

I had an alternative vision of the great communion of saints several years ago. I was on sabbatical in Washington, D.C., where I was a Fellow at the Cathedral College, which is

part of the National Cathedral. On the 30th anniversary of my ordination, I went to noon Eucharist at the Cathedral. There were only ten or so of us, and the priest invited us to come up to the high altar for communion.

There I looked up and saw with new eyes the great stone reredos, or decorative screen, behind the altar. Reaching almost to the top of the Cathedral, it is filled with carved likenesses of prophets, apostles, martyrs and ordinary people, with Christ at the top and center. All are looking down at the altar and the assembled communicants. They were looking at me as I celebrated a life of pastoral ministry. It seemed they were claiming me as one of their own. I've seldom felt so connected to the entire church, to the communion of saints in history and on the earth.

That experience is available for all at the Lord's Table – even in a non-liturgical setting like this. Our communion liturgy quotes Jesus who says “This is the joyful feast of God. Men and Women, youth and children will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and gather about my table.”

Communion bears a power beyond itself – for those who ask. Here the ancient story is reenacted. At the table, the Risen One invites us to connect with him. This table bears a power that is communal and sacred. This ancient ritual is formative. Submit to it and be changed.

The table looks out across the world to every congregation gathered for communion and reminds us we are connected to the entire church of God. I can't help thinking of that vibrant church in Madras, India, where I once went to the Lord's Table. The silver communion ware was a gift from a church in Akron, Ohio, given to the church in Madras over a century ago. As I received communion I sensed in a new way my connection to the whole church.

Every communion service, a sea of faces crowds into my mind as I remember Christ and I remember Christ's church. I always remember Lee Ritter. Lee was a farmer. Actually his wife, Marie, did most of the farming. Lee spent his days running his own heavy equipment business.

Lee was a good man, the strong and quiet type. A life long member of the congregation, Lee was elected a deacon of the church in his mid-50s. He was surprised and deeply honored to be chosen to serve God and his congregation.

The deacons served communion in that church, and Lee was nervous and excited about serving communion for the first time. He showed up on time but very tired. He'd been up all night spraying the grape vines on the farm. The wind blew most of the time there and blew the fertilizer and insecticide where it shouldn't go. Lee took advantage of a still night.

He fell fast asleep during my sermon – an act I blamed on lack of sleep, not boredom! When it came time to serve communion, it took us a few minutes to get Lee awake. That, of course, embarrassed him. He was mostly bald and when he arrived at the front of the church, his head was deep crimson. He apologized profusely and I forgave him as profusely as I knew how. I made him promise that next time he sprayed all night, he'd stay home and sleep. We'd all understand.

I remember Lee for that, and also because Lee looked a lot like the Beatitudes of our Gospel Lesson. Over the years, Lee let himself be formed by worship, Scripture, sacrament, and, I suspect, mostly by being part of that worshiping, listening, communing congregation.

The Beatitudes are not a list of entrance requirements for the kingdom of God. They are all a gift given to people who by faith enter into relationship with God. We spend the rest of our lives, especially our church lives, growing into that great gift.

It's called spiritual formation. We are formed by the liturgies, texts, and traditions to which we attend. In his quiet, saintly way, Lee was formed by a simple, country congregation.

Being connected to eternity and to the great Communion of Saints begins locally. Here, in communities like Plymouth, the biblical story takes on flesh and lives in us. Here the character of the story, which is the character of God, is built into our lives. Here faith is made real. This faith in which we stand is not an abstract idea to think about. Here we find resources for the journey, and here faith becomes alive and grows. Being the church is a living experience, a community to live oneself into.

One of my joys is listening to our members, new and old, tell how they got to Plymouth and why they stayed. The constant theme is that here we find community. When relationships are mixed with faith and faithful participation in the life of the faith community, it is always a transforming experience. If we give ourselves to God and each other, we cannot stay the same.

In September, many of you met Karen Freeze. She was here with Pavel and Radka Svetlik, our partners in the ministry of creation care in the Czech Republic. It was a reunion of sorts. Gloria and I have known Karen for twenty years, but hadn't seen her for nearly ten years. Karen is remarkable and multi-gifted person, a woman formed by faith and a vital presence in the churches to which she's belonged. She, too, looks like the Beatitudes, one of the New Testament descriptions of a saint.

What you probably didn't know is that Karen has pancreatic cancer. She is currently hospitalized in Seattle receiving another round of chemotherapy. She had a birthday last week. Her children arranged a wonderful party for her. The big surprise was a special "dessert." She wrote:

A dozen carolers (and some of the best singers) from my church choir trooped into my room singing "Wassail, Wassail, all over the Town."
[Parenthetically, I add, among Karen's many gifts is music. Both her children are professional musicians.] I of course burst into tears in shock at the wonderful surprise. They were followed by six members of the creation care (green) task force of our church, of which I am part. They continued to serenade me with anthems and songs and hymns. We went down to the party room at the end of the hall where we had dessert and we sang some more. I joined in the hymns but simply enjoyed the surround sound of the pieces. Around 8:30 I was happily exhausted, having been the recipient of so much love.

Don't wait until the crises of life to develop faith and community relationships. Listen to the story now. Sing together now. Pray together now. Love one another now. Serve God's cause on earth together now. Come to the table now.

Come in the embrace of the old transforming story made flesh in this congregation. Come to the embrace of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who invites you all to come. Come, remember, and in the memory you are connected to each other, to Christ's church, and to eternity.

Amen.