

Last Saturday I got to visit my home congregation, St. Paul's Lutheran on 19th and Portland near downtown Minneapolis. Over the last several years, I have actually had several opportunities to worship at the church where I grew up, sadly they have all been funeral services; either one of my family members or as in this case, a family member of a friend I grew up with. After the service as I talked with friends and acquaintances I haven't seen in years, shared condolences, stories, hugs, and updates on how our lives are going now, I recalled how when I was a kid I used to wonder what it would be like to have an all-church reunion someday, with friends and fellow church members I grew up with, and with the older people that I looked up to because of their strong faith in Christ. Then it hit me: Occasions like this funeral are about as close as I am going to get to having that kind of a reunion.

It struck me as I stood there enjoying good company with old friends, that this is probably as good as it will get. This is as close as I'll come to having such a get-together... at a funeral. And as you know, after a funeral is over, the grieving still goes on, as well as all the other challenges we all have to face while living in this world.

Yet, there is **good news**. Truly good news for you and me. This morning, on All Saints' Sunday, many of you have come here to remember a loved one who has departed in the faith of our Lord Jesus, either this past year or in years past. The **good news**, the **great** news, that I am able to deliver to you today, is the same good news that I called to mind as I walked back to my car after visiting St. Paul's Lutheran in Minneapolis last Saturday: A funeral, or a memorial service, or an All Saints' Sunday service, or even an all-church reunion is **NOT** as good as it will ever get for us. For you and me and for every believer in Christ from First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Glencoe and every other faithful congregation from every land and from every time there will be an indescribably joyful, glorious, and never-ending reunion one day! A gathering from which we will never have to walk away and return to the harsh realities of living in this sinful, fallen world. Just the opposite, your future is bright and glorious!

Just listen to how John describes it for us: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes" (v 9). This part of the vision recorded by John in the book of Revelation helps us to see that the life of a Christian congregation is not just about living Sunday to Sunday or year to year or decade to decade or even

a hundred years together. It's not just about what we see and experience right now, as precious and important as that is. This vision helps us to see the goal of every Christian, every congregation, and the church militant across the earth: to be part of this great multitude for eternity that no one can number from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before God's throne, standing before Christ, the Lamb slain for our sin, clothed in resurrected glory for eternity. This is the feast of victory for our God!

Why do we establish congregations in the first place? Why do we seek to be faithful in reaching out to the lost in our community year after year? Why do we call pastors, build sanctuaries, teach Sunday School, support a Lutheran Day School, give offerings sacrificially each week, and continue planning for the future? It's so that we and many others from our congregation, our community, this generation of sinners may be part of this great multitude before the throne of the Lamb! This is the true hope, the ***sure and certain*** hope, that we have as believers in the Lord Jesus, we were made for so much more than just life in this world, we were made to have fellowship with God with one another, which we will have in absolute and jubilant perfection one day in heaven!

This is the reason why God first give this vision to John to share with the seven churches of Asia minor and many other churches around the world in future generations. Our Lord knew that the faithful saints of these congregations had struggles in the past, they were going through struggles in the present, and they would encounter more in the future. Sin was alive and well in these pagan cities of ancient Rome. In the seven letters that Jesus dictates in Revelation 2-3, we hear of false apostles, false teaching, sexual immortality, the Jezebel-like priestess, spiritual lukewarmness, and much more.

This sounds a lot like the world today! Even much of the church is confused on what marriage is, how sexuality should be experienced, and Who created this world in the first place. As we heard in the Beatitudes of our Gospel lesson, Jesus promised His faithful church would face challenges: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Mt 5:11-12).

God gave this vision of the future, of the Church Triumphant after the day of resurrection, to encourage us about what our individual future is and what our future is as a congregation. This is ***your*** future: risen, living, worshiping, and singing for all eternity, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb"!

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (vv 10, 12). Knowing this is our future encourages us to be faithful and active witnesses in the present.

What is the reason given here for these saints being in heaven? Are they there because of the great lives they lived, the number of boards on which they served, or the church council meetings that they attended? No, there is only one reason given for their status: “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (v 14). Our future as a congregation, our future as part of the church militant on earth, and our future as part of the Church Triumphant in heaven is based upon the blood of the Lamb, Jesus the Christ, that was shed on Calvary’s cross to atone for your sin, for all sin! As John the Baptist proclaimed when he saw Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29). You are saints, holy ones, now and forever through the holy blood of Jesus.

This vision in Revelation 7 is actually rich with irony. The last thing you usually want on white robes would be blood; it stains permanently. But the blood that Jesus shed *cleanses* permanently, because it is a payment in full for sin. It is a blood that continues to cleanse you from sin today as you hear of it here and as you drink it at this altar. As the earlier hymn to the Lamb in Revelation 5 states: “For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9).

This vision is one of the most extensive descriptions in God’s Word of what we as the Church will do after Christ’s return into eternity. Listen to your future as Christians, as a congregation, once again: “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes” (vv 15-17). None of our years on earth have been without tears of pain and struggle; I am sorry to say there will be more tears in the years you have left in your earthly journey. You can be sure of that. Without a doubt, you have shed some tears in saying a temporary goodbye to some of the saints of your extended family and church family who are now with the Lord. But nothing ever has, nor nothing ever will, separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He refreshes us every day for our work in the world and our service to Him in His Church. But one day sin will be no more—no more hunger and thirst and struggle. Our baptismal garments will be exchanged for

the permanent robe of resurrected glory, and God will wipe every tear of pain and suffering from our eyes.

Revelation 7 helps you to see your ultimate and certain future as forgiven saints through the blood of Christ: God Himself will be with you, and He will wipe every tear from your eyes. Death will be no more, neither shall there be any mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore—and you will see His face! That is your bright and glorious future as saints through the blood of Jesus. Amen.