

“Our Hometown”

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

My hometown is not my hometown anymore.

I came to this realization eleven years ago today, when I visited North Plainfield for a special worship service at my home congregation. On the way to the church building, I drove into my old neighbourhood where I was raised, and parked across the road from 429 Grove Street, which had been our family home until it was sold in 2007. The house was still there, but it was no longer my home; a new family now lived there and had renovated the house so that it bore little resemblance to the home was I grew up. My next stop was St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, which had been my family’s home congregation since 1924. The building was still there, but it was no longer my church home, because on November 1, 2009 the congregation was closed, and the building was sold. When I left St. Peter’s after the closing service and drove out of North Plainfield, I never returned, because while the town remains it is no longer my hometown.

No matter how long we may live in a house or a community, our homes in this life are all temporary. We may have deep roots in one community, where our family has lived for generations; but the time comes when we leave these familiar places, and when subsequent generations return they often discover that the homes of their memories are not the same as the places they now visit. While we may wish that time would stand still or that we could even for one moment turn back time, we live in the reality that *“time, like an ever-rolling stream, soon bears us all away.”* (ELW Hymn 632).

On this day, we remember and give thanks for *“all the saints who from their labours rest”* (ELW Hymn 422). All Saints Day is the occasion when we remember the lives of God’s holy people who have been our mentors and role models in the faith, not only the saints who have churches and institutions named after them but saints in our lives who have shared the love of Christ and given us an example of how we might

live faithfully as God's people. We give thanks for the saints we have known and loved within the church which is "the communion of saints."

- "‘Christian church’ and ‘congregation of saints’ are one and the same thing. In other words: I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church, which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian church, that is, through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ." – Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Catechism," 1528.

As we celebrate the lives of the saints with whom we are joined through Holy Baptism, we especially remember the saints in our midst who have died in this past year. While we give thanks for the lives we shared with them, hearing their names often fills us with sadness and reminds us of the loss we have suffered when they passed away. Their names remind us that the home we shared with them is not the same now that they are missing from the familiar places we shared with them. Our home may not feel like home anymore since they were gone from our sight. But the good news that is proclaimed to us on this All Saints Day is that while we mourn those we have lost, we live in the sure and certain hope that the home we once shared with them is still a home that is ours both here in this life and when we are called to that eternal home Christ has prepared for us, to which one day "*I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also*" (John 14:3). No matter what changes might happen, our home remains the same because "*if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's*" (Romans 14:8).

This abiding relationship that God has established with us in Jesus Christ is at the heart of the message in our second lesson from the First Letter of John. This epistle has been beloved for generations; John Wesley praised it for "*how plain, how full, how deep a compendium of genuine Christianity!*" while Luther praised it as an outstanding epistle that "*can buoy up afflicted hearts. Furthermore, it has John's style and manner of expression, so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us.*" It is one of three New Testament letters that bear John's name and are related to the Fourth Gospel; but while the second and third letters are more traditional New Testament letters, the first letter is more in the form of a sermon or tractate than a

personal note. Unlike Paul's letters, the author never identifies himself, and the epistle lacks the traditional opening thanksgiving and closing greetings found in other letters of the time. What it does have in common with other epistles in the Bible is that it was written to address a specific situation in the churches that are being addressed; the dominant concern of 1 John is to reinforce the epistle's readers against a group that the author believes is doing the work of the devil and the antichrist:

- “Children, this is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.” – 2:18.
- “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.” – 4:1-3.

These opponents have seceded from the community but are still trying to win over adherents. Although they claim communion with God, they do not see any importance in keeping commandments and pretend to be free from the guilt of sin, a teaching which the author condemns by stating that *“if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ... Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist”* (1:8, 2:4). In particular, the epistle condemns these opponents because they do not show love for their sisters and brothers in Christ:

- “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.” – 2:9-11.

While encouraging his audience to reject the teachings of those who walk in such darkness, the author's overall focus in the epistle is on encouragement for his audience rather than a loss of faith. They are reminded of their identity as God's children and what it means to walk as children of the light, continuing a theme expressed in the prologue of John's Gospel: *“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”* (John 1:12-13).

On this All Saints Day, the message of this lesson “gives us hope for the saints who have preceded us in death, while reminding us of our current identity as God’s children in the midst of what can be an overwhelming world … for the author of 1 John, ‘eternal life’ as God’s children is not just a future hope, but a current reality.” (Alicia D. Myers).

The present reality that we are God’s children is the foundation for our future hope: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.” (3:1). The promise of their status as children of God is balanced with a reminder that the future into which they are growing has not bee revealed, but that in no way overturns the reality of one’s status now as a child who is beloved of God: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (3:2). While God has not fully revealed what awaits God’s children in the future (“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” – 1 Corinthians 13:12), knowing that we are God’s children is the foundation of our future hope: “If Christians know that they are growing into a future whose form resembles him in whom they dwell, then they can withstand uncertainty and loss – even death – with vigor and hope, continually replenished by God.” (C. Clifford Black).

In Holy Baptism, we believe that “we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the Body of Christ.” (ELW Holy Baptism). We believe that God claims us through water and the Word as God’s beloved children; when the sign of the cross is made on the newly-baptized, the are addressed as a “child of God … sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” All who have been born anew as children of God through baptism receive Christ’s promise that “those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). No matter how our earthly homes have changed – even if our hometowns are no longer home for us – we live in that confident hope that because we are children of God, we are always at home because we are always in the presence of the Lord who abides with us always, who makes a home with us where we are always loved and are always welcome, where no matter what changes may occur that we have Christ’s promise that “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20). Because we are “children of the Heavenly Father,” we know with confidence that “neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever” (ELW Hymn 781).

- “For the author of the Epistles, the gifts acclaimed … are not an end in themselves (as they are for his opponents) but a source of confidence in the future, provided that those who are already God’s children continue to live a life worthy of the Father whom they shall one day see face to face.” – Raymond Brown.

As we remember all the faithful departed who rest in God’s loving arms on this All Saints Day, we also remember that although they are no longer in our physical presence that we are still united with them in the “communion of saints” that include all of God’s beloved both past and present. We gather in a congregation that was established by the communion of saints who established this community and laid the foundation upon which it stands. We live and serve in the legacy of the saints who have gone before us, who surround us both in the names engraved in our stained glass windows as well as in what the letter to the Hebrews describes as “*so great a cloud of witnesses*” (Hebrews 12:1) who cheer us on as we “*run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God*” (12:1-3). As the “communion of saints,” the gather’s of God’s beloved children in this generation, we are the “living legacy” the saints who have gone before us, called to be the saints who shine the light of Christ’s love so that all may know that they are also beloved children of God and that there is a place for them in the home that is ours in the presence of the Lord.

- “To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint it to live with courage and self-restraint … but it is more than that. To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and heals. Maybe more than anything else, to be a saint is to know joy.” – Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*.

As we know that we are always home because our Lord promises to abide with all who are God’s children, we look toward that day when our Saviour will gather us into our eternal home. Our lesson from Revelation offers a glimpse of that time when God will gather together “*a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*” (7:9), the holy ones of God “*who have*

come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). No matter how difficult or arduous their lives may have been as they sought to be faithful to God’s call to be God’s children, they are now in the presence of the “throne of God” where “*they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” (7:16-17). The saints for whom we give thanks are the saints who shared Christ’s love while Christ made his home with them in this life, and who abide in the eternal home to which God one day will call all of his beloved children.

- “On All Saints Day, we make the very bold claim that all these people are our relatives. In the words of one beloved hymn, ‘They were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping, to be one too.’ We have the same blood running in our veins – Christ’s blood – and the same light we see shining in them shines in us too. One of the reasons we celebrate baptism on this day is that we want the new saints to meet the old ones. We want our children and all those who are new to Christ’s body to know who their ancestors are, and to understand that being a saint means first and foremost belonging to God.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

North Plainfield is no longer my hometown – but I have always had a place to call home, because no matter where I have lived the Lord has abided with me, loved me, welcomed me, and assured me that I am always in God’s presence. Our hometown is wherever we dwell in the presence of the Lord, where God’s love is present and active among us, and is in our midst until that day comes when we join all those we remember on this day in that place where as surely as goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our lives, we will dwell – with all the saints – the our hometown, “*in the house of the LORD forever*” (Psalm 23:6).

Amen.