

## *REFLECTIONS ON ALL SAINTS*

James 1.16 & 17

November 4, 2018, All Saints Sunday

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### **INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNION**

I was saying to my friend Bruce Chittick yesterday that I may be an introvert but there is one thing I hate to do alone. I hate to eat alone.

So when we come to this Table – introverts or extroverts, whoever we are and however different we may be – we do not come to this Table alone. This is always true. But it is especially true on All Saints Sunday when we remember our lives in the light of those who have gone before us.

We call it the “Communion of Saints.” That’s not because this Table is reserved for people who see themselves as saints or that those who have gone before us were perfect. Mitch Finley says that

... it’s simple really ...

All it says is ...

that those who have gone before us  
are still with us.

All it says is

that the past generations  
still count

and must be taken into account.

In other words,

we’re all in this together.

All of us.

That’s why this Table is open to everyone – no matter who you are – because this Table promises us that we never have to eat alone.

Even on the night he was *betrayed*, Jesus took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his disciples and said: “All of you eat this and remember me.”

## REFLECTION

James 1.16 & 17

Do not be deceived, my brothers! Every good and every perfect boon is from above, and is ever coming down to us from the Father of the heavenly lights, with whom is no variation nor shadow of eclipse.

(Translation by Helen Barrett Montgomery, 1924)

The choir’s anthem this morning reminds me of one of my favorite stories. It’s a story Sue Monk Kidd tells about her daughter getting the ... *dubious part of the Bethlehem star in the Christmas play. After her first rehearsal she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board. “What exactly will you be doing in the play?” I asked. She said: “I just stand there and shine.”*

Beloved ones, I think we need some of those Bethlehem stars and those bright shining stars to do some shining right about now.

And if we are willing to be those stars, the promise is that we will not do so alone.

The arranger of this old folk song, Shawn Kirchner, says that he learned this song from a college roommate during a road trip. When they got bored, they started singing. And when he heard this song, he “fell in love with it.” So much so that he made all the people in the car keeping singing it over and over again and adding harmonies along the way. He says:

*... I liked the way the song linked the beautiful, universal and “external” imagery of dawn and morning stars to the ... “internal” movements of renewal ... that “day-breaking in my soul.”*

“I did make one addition to the original lyrics,” he writes.

*The original verses ask ... “O where are our dear fathers? O where are our dear mothers?” I added a final verse in which the long-departed “fathers” and “mothers” have a chance to ask “O where are our dear children?” The response: “They’re upon the earth a-dancing” ... [it’s this] image of those who have passed on and those who are yet present upon the earth calling to each other “across eternity.”*

The added verse is like our ancestors are asking: “What exactly will you be doing in the play?”

We are a-dancing! We are a-shining! The day is breaking!

I was thinking of this on Friday night as we were at worship with our sisters and brothers of the Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue. We were together to mourn. We were together to remember those who were killed at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the two African-Americans, Maurice E. Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones, in Kentucky - yet another violent and deadly act aimed at those deemed “the other.” We were there – as we are this morning – to name the names of those we have lost in our own lives in this past year. And we were there to pray for the light to keep shining on another path – a path where we would not be twisted into the shape of that very revenge and that very hatred that shaped those with the guns last Saturday.

So we mourned. And we embraced each other. And we gave thanks for the gift of life.

And then ... and then we danced! We danced the ‘hora’ around the sanctuary.

Now, as many of you know, I don’t dance. To my great regret, something in that old fundamentalist Baptist DNA just won’t release my body to do all that.

But I did feel something shift in me. I remembered the words of Psalm 30: “You have turned my mourning into dancing.” It’s not that dancing takes away the grief. It’s not that we pretend that death and violence doesn’t take its toll on us.

It’s that we give ourselves over to a movement that shifts the energy toward the light; toward the promise of a dawning that is sure to break; toward each other regardless of how isolating and lonely death and loss can make us feel.

I have to say, against the backdrop of all the horrible things that have happened in these recent days – and all the horrible things that yet may happen – I have received some of those good and perfect gifts James talks about.

While Cherry Johnson was waiting with her mother as her mother was coming to the end of her life, Cherry sent me a poem. I had been writing to Cherry, assuring her that she was not alone on this journey. And she sent me back “A Prayer for the Morning” by Audette Fullbright Fulson. Out of what seemed like nowhere with death at hand and the news getting more bleak by the hour, came these words:

*Did you rise this morning,  
broken and hung over  
with weariness and pain  
and rage  
tattered from waving too long in a brutal wind?  
Get up, child.  
Pull your bones upright  
gather your skin and muscle into a patch of sun.  
Draw breath deep into your lungs;  
you will need it  
for another day calls to you.  
I know you ache.  
I know you wish the work were done*

*and you  
with everyone you have ever loved  
were on a distant shore  
safe, and unafraid.  
But remember this,  
tired as you are:  
you are not alone.  
Here  
and here  
and here also  
there are others weeping  
and rising  
and gathering their courage.  
You belong to them  
and they to you  
and together,  
we will break through  
and bend the arc of justice  
all the way down  
into our lives.*

I've been reading those words all week. And then the choir sings this morning, the "bright morning stars are rising." And Friday night our mourning turned to dancing.

I didn't plan for these good and perfect gifts. I didn't make them happen. I didn't even ask for them. They just came.

And I have to imagine that our ancestors, out of centuries of violence and hatred, ask: "What exactly will you be doing in the play? What will you be doing with these gifts and what part do you see for yourself in the drama that is unfolding in the world?"

"Saints inspire us to live more luminous lives," Molly Marshall says.

And that's true, I think. But whoever it is that does that inspiring for you – whoever it is that encourages you to just stand there and shine – that person was no more perfect than you are.

At the service on Friday night we prayed:

*May the memory of those who have died be for the world a blessing, and may we never let the light of their life and the light of their love grow dim in our hearts. May all their worthy deeds, even all their human struggles, be remembered now with love ...*

Sometimes it's the challenges; sometimes it's the perfectly placed imperfection; sometimes it's the brokenness; sometimes it's the cracks, as Leonard Cohen says, that lets the light get in.

“Don't be deceived,” James says, “every good and perfect gift” comes down from the Source of Light. And those gifts may not look either good or perfect to you at the time. But sometimes, in the light of memory, you can see something that makes you want to go a-dancing or to stand and sing: “This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.”

What exactly will you be doing in the play?

Because today, if you hear God's voice, be prepared to strap on those dancing shoes or, if you can't do that, just stand there and shine. But whatever you do, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The “Communion of Saints” at the beginning of Communion is by Mitch Finley from *Whispers of Love* and Sue Monk Kidd's story about her daughter is from *When the Heart Waits*. Both are quoted in Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat's *Spiritual Literacy* (Scribner, 1996), Finley, p.478, and Sue Monk Kidd, p.446-447. Molly Marshall's quote is from *Baptist News Global*. The prayer from Bet Alef is from the High Holyday Worship section of their prayer book compiled in 2018 by Rabbi Olivier BenHaim, p.37,