



The Great Multitude

Revelation 7:9-17

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Last Sunday afternoon, we held our annual Charge Conference meeting. The meeting was led by our District Superintendent, the Rev. Jeff Mickle. To begin the meeting, Rev. Mickle led us in a short devotion around our Annual Conference theme of, *See all the People*. He invited us to think about how, in this year of 2020, with all of its challenges and struggles, God has led us to, well, to *see all the people*.

Throughout the meeting, we reflected on the ways our church has adapted in the midst of this year's socially distant ministry to continue our work as a church. We talked about how Open Table has expanded, and has seen the involvement of local businesses, and even other churches, who have offered clothing and supplies. We talked about our shared work in the food distributions at Charles Houston Recreation Center, and how we have responded to the need for food resources in our local community. We highlighted the Conversations on Race, which have invited us to hear and see from the perspective of a historically marginalized population in our church, community, and nation. We looked at our work with the Church of South Washington, and named how this relationship invites us to grow in our understanding of God's call upon the body of Christ. We talked about worship, and how we have expanded our online services to allow us to engage with one another, and to include a greater number of church participants in worship – including people in worship from all over the world. And we talked about our online fellowship opportunities, allowing us to stay connected with one another through a most difficult year.

As we talked about *seeing all the people*, my mind took me back to last year's Charge Conference, in which Rev. Mickle highlighted this passage in Revelation 7. This isn't just a passage about *seeing* all the people, it's a passage about the *gathering* of all the people in the presence of the throne of God.

I felt like this was an appropriate passage for this day, All Saints Day, and the Sunday prior to our presidential election. And no, I didn't think it was appropriate simply because it comes from the book of Revelation ... though, I'd be lying if I didn't see the sadistic humor in the connection. More honestly, it seems an appropriate passage because, as we stand on the precipice of a national election, (which, while but one election in our national history, seems to have us standing at the diversion of two roads,) the passage invites us to consider what it is we are looking forward to as those who declare a faith in God through Christ.

There's been a lot of talk as of late about what it means to be a Christian, how such a calling invites us to engage in the world around us, and how our faith – how we live our faith – is indicative of what we believe about God, and God's will for creation.

To understand how this text calls us to faithfulness, we have to understand the background to this text, which is set in the midst of Revelation. The Book of Revelation is written in the form of apocalyptic literature; it's a type of writing that was common in the Ancient Near East. Honestly, if someone were to write a similar type of text today, we'd likely call it a conspiracy theory, or the ramblings of a disturbed mind.

The Book of Revelation was written by John right at the end of the first century. John was isolated on the island of Patmos, and he wrote of these visions – or these “revelations” – he had regarding the ending of the worldly creation. Our text today comes in the middle of his second vision, which spans from chapters 4 to 11.

As a book about the end of times, about the future and final coming of Christ, the Book of Revelation is intended to be a guide for the people of faith today as to what they can and should expect about the future. It would be like Marty McFly coming back from the future to give us tips and advice on what we should be doing, and how we should be living, so as to ensure the best ending in the future. This is John's intent in sharing these revelations with the faithful of Christ. If we know what God intends in the end, it can, and should, affect how we live in the here and now.

In the first half of chapter 7, John is describing this vision of the earth, prior to the consummation. The angels are standing at the four corners of the earth – a flat earther's favorite text to prove their scientifically erroneous claim. The angels are told to be ready to destroy the earth, but not until God's faithful have been marked. Then we see the 144,000 members gathered, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, who are marked with a seal – like the blood of the Passover lamb, which marked the doors of the Israelites, declaring them among the faithful of God. This number represents “in theological terms the church triumphant, made up of an incalculable number of all global Christians.”ⁱ

As we move in to our text today, beginning in verse 9, the place of the vision shifts. Verse 9 begins, “After this, I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count.” John isn't speaking of a sequential time-line, he's speaking about what came next in the vision. Following the roll call of the 12 tribes represented on earth, his vision shifts to a heavenly worship around the divine throne. This crowd, gathered before the throne of the Lamb, is too great to count, and it is universal in nature; it includes people of every tribe, nation, race, and tongue.

In and of itself, this description of the heavenly gathering is instructive in nature. What began as a vision of just the members of the 12 tribes of Israel has been expanded in the heavenly host to include, not just those of the ancient tribes of Israel, but a gathering that is far more expansive than the early church was fully capable of comprehending. This is the point of

apocalyptic literature – to invite us to see what we cannot currently see, or even comprehend. The text is intended to expand our own limited capacity to think about God.

And, pay attention, because the text doesn't tell us that the assembly was just a diverse gathering, made up of God's faithful across the globe. This isn't just a worship service of multicultural diversity. The people cried in a voice of *unison*, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" "Although the crowd is multilingual [having come from multiple nations and speaking multiple languages], it is nonetheless able to cry aloud with one voice to God and to the Lamb."ⁱⁱ And no, for clarity's sake, in John's revelation, they aren't all speaking together in English. If it matters, the book was written in Greek; however, John doesn't say they all spoke the same language at all; it simply says "they cried out in a loud voice." "Unity and difference, the one and the many, are here depicted as being mutually reinforcing rather than competitive."ⁱⁱⁱ

Again, John's vision is trying to make a point to the people of God currently seeking a way of faithful living. The early church had been through multiple iterations of asking, "who can be included among the faithful?" The earliest of Jewish Christians had sought to exclude gentiles, and yet, the Spirit's presence insisted on gentile expansion. The early Church had excluded the eunuchs, but at the Spirit's participation, the Church was expanded with the eunuch was baptized. In the time of the early Church, women were excluded among the leaders of the community, and yet, in God's creation of the Church, we see the expansion of leadership to include women, such as Junia, Mary, and Persis, among others. In the early Church, the leaders were predominately the older, more experienced elders, and yet, we see the expansion of the Church with youthful leaders, like that of Timothy. In the early formation of the Christian Church, even at the crucifixion of Christ, though the faith was thought to be reserved for the Jews, we see the expansion of the community of God when it is the *Roman* centurion who proclaims, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

John, in his vision of this expansive gathering before the throne of God, is able to tie together this continual work of God in inviting and expanding, so that all of God's created might be gathered as one before the throne of the Lamb. And in doing so, in this shared voice of the great abundance of God's created, the multi-national gathering makes a very political statement, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the lamb." "When John makes that claim exclusively for God ... he is not only making a positive statement about God and the Lamb; he is also making a pejorative one about Rome."^{iv}

Again, what we come to know about the future implicates who we are, and how we live, in the present. This is John's intent in sharing these visions. "Though it is a vision about the end time, it maintains an ethical message commending politically active, non-accommodating behavior in the present moment of the churches in Asia Minor."^v Caesar, who led Rome, claimed to be lord, and claimed that through Rome's militaristic conquest and power, the nation of Rome could provide salvation for all its conquered and oppressed populations – including the Jewish and Gentile Christians. "John wants his hearers and readers to recognize Rome for the false pretender that it is."^{vi}

After this chorus of affirmation for the Lordship of God, in verse 13, we are told that one of the elders comes up to John and asks, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” It’s a fascinating question, that seems rhetorical in nature. It’s hard to tell if John even understands the question, as he doesn’t even attempt to answer. Instead, John turns the question back toward the elder, saying, “Sir, you are the one who knows.”

The elder does know, and tells us who it is that makes up this multi-national, multi-lingual, multi-racial crowd before the throne of God. “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Again, in this vision, we – in the present – are instructed from the future. This gathered crowd is not present in this apocalyptic space because of their own success, or their own control, or even their own determination and power. John seems intent to ensure we do not think our witness is sufficient on its own. We are able to gather in such an eternal chorus, not because of our work, because of the blood of the Lamb – because of the work of God in Jesus Christ. “Their own death is not an accomplishment of which they can boast. It is Christ’s death, not their own courage and determination, which has given them their victor’s garment.”^{vii}

John could not lay out his intention any more clearly. His vision seeks to make plain and clear an honest reality for the church and her people. This future, this expectation, this vision is not a hopeful suggestion. This *is* the way of God, because God has already declared this path in the person of Jesus Christ.

And on this day, on All Saint’s Day, it is fitting to claim such an eternal promise. We, as mainline protestants in the Methodist Church, we don’t have an official policy as to who gets to become a “saint” in the church. There is not ratification process, or board of trustees over the process of sainthood. In many ways, we define saints as any whom we have loved and lost. But for me, though I remember many loved ones who have joined the eternal chorus, when I think of the saints of my life, it is but a few individuals who stand out. They stand out, not just because they were loving individuals, or even good and just people. They stand out because their life, their witness, their invitation as a person of faith, was always to a greater acknowledgement than their self.

I think of people like Jackie James, who made sure she was here early at church on Sunday mornings, and who stayed in the back until everyone was gone, because she wanted you to know you were welcomed in the gathering of God’s faithful – a part of this expansive community. I think of people like the Rev. Douglas Gibson, a pastor emeritus at my home church, who was intentional about encouraging the youth of our church to listen to God’s calling, empowering us to lead, even as teenagers. I think of people like Rachel Held Evans, who intentionally invited women to find and use their God-given voices in the midst of the evangelical church in America, which has often sought to silence women. The Saints are those who direct us, not to become what we are not, but to become who God has already gifted us to be.

Joseph Mangin, in his commentary on Revelation, offers that saying, ““Become what you already are” is generally bad advice, if we consider who we are in ourselves.” And yet, he insists, “Spoken to those whose identity is sealed by Christ’s promise, it is the very best advice possible.”^{viii}

Spoken in the vision – in the revelation – of John, this is the invitation of the gathered crowd before the throne of God. In God’s will and God’s way, we have nothing to fear. We need not fear scarcity, or thirst. We need not worry for tomorrow. For the Lamb will be our shepherd, and will guide us to the way of life. God will wipe away our tears, and will lead us before the throne of the one true King; the Lord of all the earth; the eternal and the heavenly God of the hosts. And together, because we are God’s people, we will join with the saints, past and present and yet to come, in the great gathering of all of God’s people, across tribe, nation, race, and tongue, and we will proclaim that Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.

So may the saints who have taught and shown us this message, and may the vision of God for God’s people, lead us in the way of life. For this is the call of God for us, God’s people, to work in concert with God’s work, that we may share in the victorious glory of God eternal will. To the saints, and to God’s vision for all creation, may we strive and give thanks. Amen.

ⁱ Israel Kamudzandu. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved October 28, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Joseph L. Mangin. *Revelation: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mangin.

^{iv} Brian K. Blount. *Revelation: The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.

^{viii} Mangin.