

Every Tear

Isaiah 25:6-9 & Revelation 21:1-6a

All Saints' Sunday/ 7th November 2021

Long ago, John had a revelation in a cave on the island of Patmos, just off the coast of modern Turkey, in the Aegean Sea. He was given a glimpse of the future. He saw a procession of countless multitudes, from all tribes, peoples, and languages, robed in white and standing before the throne of the Lamb. Angels and elders and the company of heaven stood around the throne, and they fell on their faces before the Lamb and worshipped God (Rev. 7:9-17). The Lamb, the Risen Christ, was at the center, the bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16) that shines forever, for night is no more. There, “they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, . . .” (Rev. 22:5). The great communion of saints, this glad procession is led into doxology, into endless praise of Christ, the Light.

That vision, that glimpse of the future, allowed John to face the present, giving him hope, hope amid crisis—the crisis of his life, in exile for his faith. It was the crisis of Christians persecuted for their commitment to the Resurrected Christ, followers of Christ who felt at odds with the violence of an empire, an empire that prided itself in dehumanizing power and domination. John’s vision of the future empowered him to face his present suffering, and it changed the way he related to the suffering of his past, that is, everything that led him to be a prisoner of the empire, to an island, to a cave. Future. Present. Past. Past. Present. Future. All meet in that cave, the cave of the apocalypse.

There’s something like that cave whenever Christians gather for worship on the Lord’s Day. Past, present, future meet here. This is especially so on Sundays when we gather at the Lord’s Table. When we offer in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (or Eucharistic Prayer) the *Sursum corda*—“Lift up your hearts. We lift them to the Lord.”—we are lifted up into the presence of God and share in the heavenly feast. John Calvin (1509-1564) stressed that when we share the Lord’s Supper, when we pray for the Holy Spirit’s presence in bread and cup, we become participants in the heavenly feast. Past. Future. Present. All meet here. And we’re especially conscious of this connection on All Saints’ Sunday, as we remember the saints in light and give thanks for their lives among us, as we remember all those who have gone on before us. Past. Present. Future. Future. Present. Past. Time flows in both directions simultaneously and meets in the Alpha and Omega.

Worship on All Saints’ Sunday is always a poignant service as we remember friends we have lost this year. For many, it’s a difficult service. The memories, the grief, are still fresh. There’s the loss of love, companionship. There’s regret. Lost opportunities. Unanswered questions. Loose ends. Unresolved issues. Unresolved feelings. This year feels different. It’s been a year of enormous suffering and loss. More than 700,000 Americans, alone, have died from COVID.

Even if you haven’t lost someone dear to you this year, you know what grief feels like. Grief hurts. The pain of grief requires attention. Grief always deserves our respect. The depth of grief, as we know, is also a measure of our love—the greater the love, the greater the

grief. There is no love without grief. Perhaps this is what William Faulkner (1897-1962) was getting at when he said, “Between grief and nothing, I will take grief.”¹ Grief implies love. The tears we shed are tears of pain mixed with love. In this sense, then, as odd as it may sound, we can be thankful for our tears, grateful for a broken heart because it’s a heart that knows the power of love. And then our tears become a gift. Tears become an expression of grace. We can make space for them. The Dutch religious writer Ety Hillesum (1914-1943), who died at age 29 in Auschwitz, influenced by both Jewish and Christian mystics, left behind her diaries and letters, full of wisdom. She wrote, “Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate... and if you have given sorrow the space it demands, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich.”²

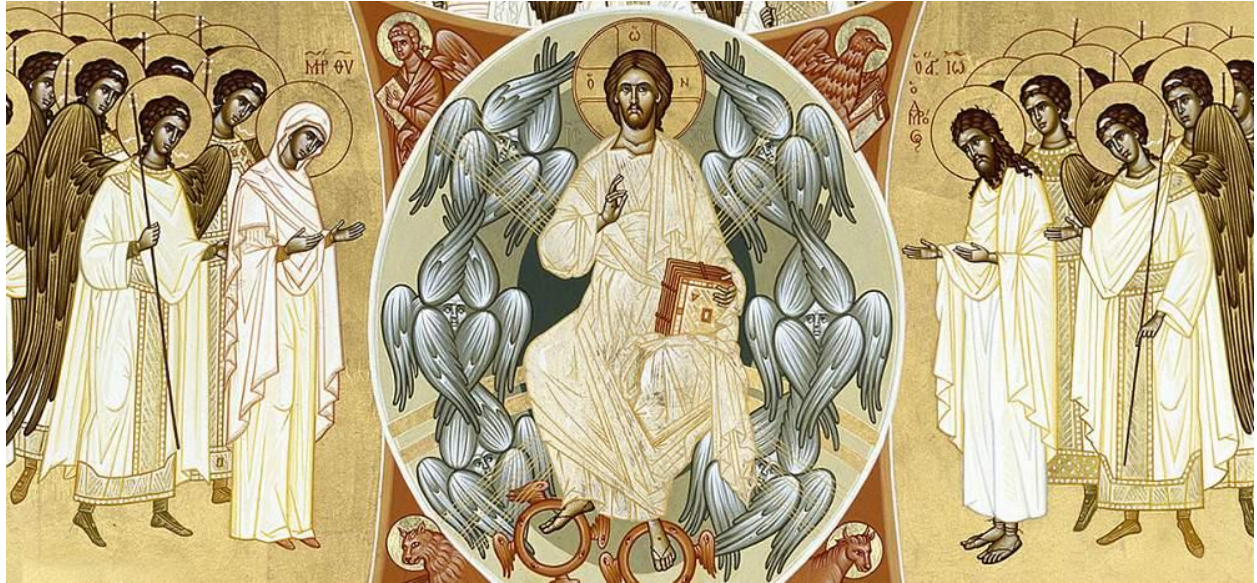
I have come to be grateful for my tears and the grief of my life, especially the grief rooted in love. And as you know, some grief never ends. I’ve come to feel there’s a kind of grief, bizarre as they may sound, that I don’t want to ever get over because why would I ever want to get over love?

Nevertheless, unending grief is not the whole story. There will come a time, and already now is because the future is now, when all that causes pain, grief, and crying will be no more. For every tear will be wiped from our eyes (Isaiah 25: 8; Rev. 21:3-4). First things yield to new things. “I am making all things new,” says the Lord (Rev. 21:5). We dwell within the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End who holds all things, holds us, as the old hymn put it, with “a love that will not let us go.”³ That’s the vision John received, like so many who have come after him. A vision of a deeper reality. A vision that allows us to see everything in a new light, with new insight.

It’s not unlike the vision at the end of Dante’s (1265-1321) *Divine Comedy*, in the *Paradiso*. Dante’s journey leads him to the fellowship of the saints in light, to the beatific vision. Dante says, “...for the divine light penetrates the universe according to the fitness of its parts so that nothing can hinder it.” He explains, “This secure and joyful kingdom, thronged with people of old times and new, had sight and love all on one mark.”⁴ Their focused attention was on Christ at the center. “From that moment,” Dante says, “my vision was greater than [my] speech, which fails at such a sight, and memory fails at such excess.”⁵ In the end, the vision is love, and love allows him to see. Things, people, creation, God only become visible through love. Love illumines. It’s the love of Christ as light that allows us to see. It’s this love, as Dante came to know, “that moves the sun and the other stars.”⁶

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we claim this truth and take great comfort in this: that life and death are held by Christ, who sits as “the center,” the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end (Rev. 21:6). Because “In him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), heaven and earth are reconciled; past, present, future are one and held together. In Christ, we always stand in some relation to those who’ve gone on before us and who now wait for us. We “share,” right now, “in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12). “We are surrounded,” right now, “by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). Can you see them? Can you hear them? Can you feel their presence? Heaven and earth are one, time past, time future, time present, all held together in Christ’s love.

*O blest communion, fellowship divine.
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet, all are one in thee for all are thine. Alleluia. Alleluia.*⁷



All Saints Icon, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA.

¹ William Faulkner, *The Wildest Palms* (Random House, 1937).

² ETTY HILLESUM, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943 and Letters from Westerbork* (Picado, 1996).

³ An allusion to the poem “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” written in 1881 by the Church of Scotland minister George Matheson (1842-1906). Later a hymn composed by Albert Lister Peace, in 1884, to the tune ST. MARGARET, named for the 11th-century patroness of Scotland.

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: III. Paradiso*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), Canto XXXI, 447.

⁵ Dante, Canto XXXIII, 485

⁶ Dante, Canto XXXIII, 485.

⁷ From the hymn “For All the Saints.” Text written by William Walsham How (1823-1897).