

Sermon – 11-5-2017
All Saints Sunday – Revelation 7
by
Pastor Christopher Miller

On this All Saints' Day, it is appropriate to talk about all the saints. That's why the first reading today is not from an Old Testament passage, but from the book of Revelation. Revelation is about the end of this world and the beginning of the next. And chapter 7 contains one of the most beautiful descriptions of what "the end" looks like. It almost reads like an Old Testament prophecy in some ways. The imagery of the four living creatures and the white robes echo those great passages. These are the ones who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, there is one inference for us to make: you are in this group. You are in the Bible. You are one of this multitude gathered before the throne, before the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. You are there. You are here.

And there are others too. I love the list in verse 9 of who is there: people of every nation, tribe, people, and language. I also know that a list like that in English terms sometimes misses what was intended, so I decided to dig deeper on each term. And what I found there has messages for us here, in the gathering of God's saints on earth. The first word in the list is *ethnos*, of which "nation" is a good translation. The dictionary definition is "a body of persons united by kinship, culture, and common traditions." *Ethnos* is usually used in the New Testament to describe nations that are outside of

Israel. It's kind of a catch-all term for the Gentiles. Today, there are many nations that dot our landscape. There are 193 recognized countries on the planet currently. But between nations and even within nations, that "kinship, culture, and common tradition" are not present. We start to break things down even further.

Usually, the next step is into tribes, or as it is here in the Greek, *foolay*. A tribe is characterized by a distinctive bloodline. These are the people that we share genes with. That is, of course, your immediate family and relatives, but there are wider parts of the genome that we share with others. You've seen the commercials lately for the DNA testing programs that can tell you where your ancestors came from. There's always something surprising, such as someone who thought he was Italian being 30% Eastern European. But those connections of genetics increase connections of people as well. We feel a kinship with those come from the same place, the same town, or same country. How many people will come to our dinner on Saturday because they had ancestors from Norway or Sweden? And it can be hard to enter into those connections if you're "not from around here".

The next word is "people". Pretty basic. The Greek is "people". This word directly refers to those who share a culture, which may be tied to a specific territory. Sharing a culture is foundational to this group named, and there are more cultures out there than we think. Often, when we say "culture," we think in macro terms, the cultures of societies.

But there are a lot more cultures than that. We can talk about a corporate culture. We can talk about a congregational culture. We can talk about socioeconomic cultures. My family, even within my tribe, had different cultures. The Millers were very proper and polite. If a Halgrimson didn't feel like they were being heard, they just talked louder. Rebecca has called coming into my family a "cross-cultural" experience. When you are crossing over into another culture, you can have a difficult time getting the landscape, or you can also just reject parts of the culture as silly or backwards.

The last word is "language," which is just that, the words you use to communicate. But if you've ever tried to communicate with someone in the same language and had a hard time, you understand how this can even be a dividing point. I've been told that because I speak theological "language", I sometimes go over the heads of people. I admit it; I do. At the same time, if someone tries to explain advanced organic chemistry to me, I'm not going to understand, because I don't speak the language. We can often get frustrated when people won't speak to us in a language we understand. Usually, we just give up on trying to understand, and forget the other person entirely. In fact, that's what happens with a lot of the divisions that we've talked about in this list. If there are those who are not a part of our nation, tribe, culture, or language, we often ignore them, degrade them, reject them, or even trumpet our own as without flaw. There is this competitiveness that lies in the

human heart, that feels a need to push down others in order that we may be lifted up.

But I want you to notice something. Every nation, every tribe, every culture, every language, they are all at the foot of this throne. None of them have thrones of their own. And notice that they all have one thing in common: their robes are all washed in the blood of the Lamb. Their culture doesn't matter. Their nation doesn't matter. Their family doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what Jesus Christ has done for them, and for you. What does this mean for now? It means that we can listen to and join with Christians of all stripes. We can join with those who have different perspectives on the world. We can join with those who have radically different ways of living out their faith. We can join with those who speak to different audiences or in different languages. We can join with them, because Christ has joined us all together. We are all saints, because of the death and resurrection of Christ. And this is where you find yourself, in the community of all nations, tribes, cultures, and languages, all under the covering of the blood of the Lamb. AMEN.