

November 7, 2021
All Saints Sunday
United, Oak Park

All Knit Together

State highway 128 bisects the cemetery where members of my Grandma Bushkofsky's family is buried in the tiny northeastern Iowa community of Clayton Center, but I've always thought of the two sections as being connected. I remember going to my great grandmother's funeral in 1967, which was at the church that sits in the middle of the two sections of the cemetery, and though she was buried in the newer section, across the road from where her parents were buried, Zion Lutheran Church's building seems to tie them all together.

My great grandmother had been baptized at that same church eighty three years earlier—almost to the day. She lived most of her life on just a couple of different farms in Read Township, almost within a stone's throw of that place, and that church would have represented much of her social life growing up. No doubt the names on nearly all of the gravestones in the surrounding cemetery—whether on the north or south sides of the road—commemorated people who she had known quite well. She would have gone to school, played, or have been

confirmed with many of them. They all continued to speak their native language of German even for a number of years after the first World War made it challenging for them to do so outside their own tightly-knit community.

That knitting together of a community of believers—so common in rural America, and even in Chicago neighborhoods where people often referred to their community by the name of the local parish—is the metaphor that many English-speaking Christians have summoned for over 350 years on the festival of All Saints. We used it today in our Prayer of the Day: “Almighty God, you have knit your people together in one communion in the mystical body of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

That communion, of course stretches far beyond the tightly-knit communities that many of us have known in decades past. The communion of Jesus Christ includes all who have ever followed him, whether living on earth now or not, and it stretches far beyond our time to include those who will follow us.

It's probably hard for us to imagine a community any greater than that, but what we have summoned up today includes the saints people have portrayed on stained glass windows and with special days on the calendar for hundreds of years, and we include people who were instrumental witnesses to us about the love of Jesus Christ and who had a hand in shaping our own faith and the various directions we have gone with our lives. While this is indeed a communion that is with us always, and that is certainly with us anytime we gather around God's holy meal, it's a communion that we acknowledge in a special way today.

Our reading today from Isaiah imagines all peoples being gathered together on God's holy mountain for a rich feast with choice wines and wonderful foods. Moreover, on that mountain death will be swallowed up forever, and tears will be wiped from every face. It's a promise of abundance and a removal of everything that causes sorrow and hardship, and without a doubt it has provided many of us with notions about what heaven might be like.

We encountered a similar vision today in the book of Revelation, where God makes a dwelling with humankind and there is no distinction between heaven and earth. All live *together* with God. Tears are also wiped away in this vision, and death and mourning and crying or pain will be no more.

Whatever thoughts we may have about the resurrection of all believers and living for eternity in heaven, from the moment of each of our baptisms we are joined to a church that continues on for generations beyond each of our own lives. In this we can firmly believe: as long as there are followers of Jesus Christ living out his mission on earth, the life and witness of God's saints from all times will continue. And that reality of the ever-expanding life and mission of the church gives me incredible hope now.

One thing that I remember doing right after the burial of my great grandmother's body in the new section of the cemetery across the road from Zion Lutheran Church, is coming back to the church's fellowship hall immediately afterwards for a funeral lunch. I have been a part of

countless occasions like that in the years since, and they have been just as important in reminding me about God's promises for new life and the days ahead as anything we might have encountered in the moments during a funeral service inside the church or during a committal at the cemetery. Indeed it is in those moments of gathering for a meal after a funeral where our bonds with others are strengthened, and where we are reminded that even in losing someone who meant a great deal to us, life still goes on.

Even the aromas from urns of brewed coffee and steaming hot casserole dishes pulled from the oven, is a reminder that the kinds of occasions we experienced together with the one who has just died will continue with our family and friends who have gathered that day. There is laughter as we recall a number of childhood and youthful events; perhaps practical jokes that the recently deceased may have even played on us. We vow to continue many of our family traditions as we make copies of grandma's dessert recipes and share photos of past occasions with our social media network.

Admittedly, it's been hard for us to do many of these things in recent months as COVID-19 made it nearly impossible for us to gather for a number of the communal rituals that often help us through our grieving. I experienced this myself when my own father died near the beginning of the pandemic. Though we had a traditional visitation at the funeral home and a committal service at the cemetery, we missed out on the usual service at the church and gathering together with friends and generations of relatives for a meal that followed. No doubt most of us have also grieved a number of losses in the past year and a half without the expected traditions that have so often provided comfort and stability to us.

And yet, even in our most recent periods of mourning, the communion of God's saints from all times and places continues to surround us too. We are firmly knit to God's people who gather now and who will continue to gather—whether on this side of the road or on the other side. God and God's church remains at the center of it all, and because of that we will have life!