

THE MELODY OF PEACE

Revelation 21:1-6a

All Saints Day, 2009

(The Festival of All Saints, Yr. B)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's the Sunday of Saints, the first of November, the Feast of All Saints. And today we remember *all* the saints, and *all* the people who touched our lives with love and grace. But in *some* churches they do this a bit earlier. Round the first of *September* at Blue Jay, mind you. Only *they* called it Homecoming. Homecoming *Sunday*. And that's what happens. People come home. They come to hear an old pastor reminisce and remember and give

2
them a word of grace and hope. And they come to sit down to a wonderful feast, a holy helping of scalloped potatoes, and sweet corn, and half-runner beans, with golden-fried chicken. Which is all just the appetizer, mind you. Because the main course at these things is always dessert. Fried apple pies, and blackberry cobbler, with homemade ice cream.... It's a good reason to come home, I think. "And if you're going to come home," they would say, "you might as well stay for supper." And they do. They come every year in September. And they come to be fed.

And they come for the singing, which lasts all afternoon. Right after the great feast -- "Dinner on the Grounds," they call it. They slowly begin to make their way back into the little church. And those who are not anesthetized by the cobbler and ice cream have what we Methodists sometimes call a Wesley Service -- or what people in the South would just call a "Sing." Because that's what they do. They sing all the songs they sang way back when. Old hymns like ***Farther Along*** and ***In the Sweet By and By*** and ***When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder***.

And they'll have trios and solos and quartets with banjos. And all of them made up of people who went to that church when they were children. One family even had twins there one year at the "Homecoming Sing." And Ray and Wilma Elliott's daughter would come all the way from Texas to be there. She was Director of Music Ministries at a big church in Houston. But she would come home that weekend just to play and sing for her family and all the people who loved her and taught her and prayed for her when she was a child.

And Judge Canterbury was there with his old quartet. And Winky Martin was there with his brand new auto harp. An electrified autoharp, he called it. Played *The Ninety and Nine* on the thing (or tried to). And then he looked up, shook his head, and said, "Friends, there's a lot of music in this little box if I could just get it out of there!" And Joe Deeds would play his banjo from one side of the church while Miss Martha would sing from the other. And the kids would be frightened ... I'm not sure whether it was her big squeaky voice that scared them, or her big,

wild-looking hair! It looked something like a water buffalo in a tornado, I think!

And at homecoming people would stand (between songs) and talk about the church. They'd give thanks for the people, past and present, who had graced their lives in so many ways. And it was wonderful. Really. And overwhelming, at times. Because they were all just people, mind you -- plain old, ordinary, everyday people. Ah, but they spoke of an extraordinary God who was always there for them, no matter what. And they spoke of *hardship* and *suffering*, of *sickness* and *loss*. They spoke of times in their lives when they just couldn't see how they'd ever get through. And yet, they all spoke of times in their lives when they just couldn't see how they'd ever get through. And yet, they all spoke of this loving God who would never give up on them or let them go. A God who named them and claimed them to be his very own. His **beloved**. His **children**. And it was just overwhelming, for me, at least. Because they spoke with such beauty and grace.

But the most eloquent word we heard that day came from a man who could no longer speak. His name was Ray Elliott. He was the *song leader* there at Blue Jay for a whole generation. He led hymns and the choir there at Blue Jay for forty years. And people loved him. They did.

Ray passed away almost twenty years ago. But if you are in Blue Jay for more than ten minutes, you'll hear about Ray and his rich, beautiful, tenor voice that was warm and full, and strong and tender -- just as he was, I think.

But something happened to Ray not too long before I was appointed to the two churches on the Beaver-Blue Jay Charge. Something went wrong. No one knew what at the time. But it was something -- some terrible illness, or a stroke, or something. And the voice was still there ... but the words were gone. And when Ray tried to speak, he sounded like a child, in a way -- a wee child who makes sounds that aren't really words. And no one knew what he was trying to say.... Every time I went to see him up on the hill, I'd sit with Ray and tell him everything I knew about the church and everyone in it. And then he would

reach for the old hymnal that was always there by his side. And he'd open it up and point to a hymn. And we'd sing it together. He'd sing with his warm, gentle voice that couldn't make any words. And I'd sing along.

And that's what he did on Homecoming Sunday. He stood up and made sounds that weren't really words. And then he looked around and he stretched out his hands, and he brought them together, and lifted them up, as if he was trying to say to show us something. And he started to sing. The words were gone, but the tune -- oh, the tune was still there. And everyone knew what it was...

Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod ... gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

Ray didn't say a word. But the message was loud and clear: ***The best is yet to come. For there WILL be a homecoming. You can count on it. There will be! And we'll all be together with the saints at the river... So don't give up. Don't be discouraged! The best is yet to come! L***

It reminds me of another old saint. A prince. *Dale* Prince was his name. And that's what he was -- a little round man with a big booming voice. You'd have sworn it was Santa Claus himself if you heard him laugh, Because he was such a jolly old soul.

Dale was a trustee at Christ Church in Clarksburg. And every month, on the second Tuesday, the trustees would meet in the parlor at seven. And by 7:05, Dale would be asleep! And he'd stay that way for about an hour. And then, around 8 o'clock, somebody'd nudge him. And he'd open his eyes big and wide and say, "I move to adjourn." And we would. We'd all laugh and go home. But none of us laughed any louder than Dale. He was *always* laughing, always smiling. And the funny thing (or the sad thing) is that Dale was almost always hurting. Because Dale had arthritis, the crippling kind. And his hands and fingers were twisted and bent with it.

And then they discovered that Dale had cancer. And the pain was even worse.... But Dale didn't stop laughing. And he didn't stop singing! Though some of his neighbors probably wished that he would! Because he sang loud!

And everyday you could hear him singing his favorite song...

**There's a land beyond the river,
That they call the sweet forever.
And we only reach its shores by faith's decree;
One by one we'll gain the portals,
there to dwell with the immortals
when they ring those golden bells for you and me.**

One day I went to see him. And when I walked in he was singing that song. *Don't you hear the bells now ringing?* he sang. *Don't you hear the angels singing?* And he stopped and looked up at me. And he cupped his hand behind his ear as if he was listening for them off in the distance.... "Nope!" he said. "Not yet. But I will. I will. And one of these days I'm going to sing *with* them!" And he laughed and he smiled ... and I nearly burst into tears. But I got the message. It was as if he had said, "**Listen! You can almost hear them singing. So don't be discouraged. And don't ever give up! But sing and rejoice! For the best is yet to come!**"

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nineteen hundred years ago, people in churches were almost always hurting. Because the world didn't want them. Truth is it tried to destroy them. And all because those pesky Christians wouldn't say that the emperor was greater than the One they called Lord. So they made life hard for the Church -- *all of them*, mind you. As if following Jesus was a bad thing, a *criminal* thing even. So they had them arrested and put away in prisons, where some were beaten or tortured or worse -- just because they worshipped God.

And it didn't make sense to them. Why should they have to *suffer* for trying to do good? Why should *they* of

all people be treated like that? "We're supposed to be God's people," they thought. "God's children! God's own!" But they were treated like death row inmates. And some of them were put to death. So from the looks of things, you'd have thought the whole Church was dying. Because there was no hope. And where there's no hope ... there's no life. It's just over, they thought. It's just all over and done.

But there was an old man, way up in years by that time, who sent them a letter. They called him *the Beloved*. An old man named John. And this strange and wonderful letter they called *John's Apocalypse*. The word means "to uncover." And that's what it did. It uncovered the truth. And the truth is it wasn't the end -- **it was just the beginning**. For God would be with them, said John, **no matter what**. God would not let evil destroy them. And John told them about the dreams he had dreamed and the vision God had given him. And how the tables would turn, and death and sorrow and suffering and pain would come to an end. And they'd be at home with their God. And God would be with them for ever and ever.

And there are many strange and wonderful things in the letter he sent them. But the message was loud and clear. **Listen**, he told them. **You can almost hear them -- the saints and the angels and all of God's people singing his praise. So don't give up! Be glad and rejoice! For the best is yet to come! ✠**

Nineteen centuries have come and gone. Nineteen hundred years. But the message is still the same. When the shadows fall, and the hard times come, and when life just doesn't seem to make sense, hold on. Hold on to your faith. Because it isn't the end. It's just the beginning. And God *will* be with you. He *will*. And someday, somehow the tables will turn. And suffering and sorrow and pain and death will come to an end. And we'll join our voices with all the saints of every time and place. And we'll sing the song of unending praise> And if you cup your hand behind your ear and open your heart, you can almost hear them singing it now....

They (the ones we honor today) heard it, I think... somewhere, somehow, in their heart of hearts. The *words* may not have been there for them. But somehow they

knew. And they passed it on to you. For just like Ray and Dale and Saint John the Beloved, they were common, everyday, ordinary people. But through their hearts and their hands, with their words and their deeds, they spoke to us of an extraordinary God -- a God who never gives up -- and never lets go of the people he loves.

My grandmother was like that. A common and ordinary person. And from the time I was a little boy to the very day that she died she would sing and tell stories. And the stories were about *lots* of things, really. Some were true and some she made up, and some were a little of both, I think. But somehow when I heard them, they were my stories ... as if somehow the *Ugly Duckling* and *The Hare and the Tortoise* and all of the others had something to do with me. They were *my* stories. And yet, somehow, they were God's stories, too.

And through all of those stories -- through the words of her mouth and the work of her hands -- she told me about this extraordinary God. A God who loved *me*. And every night when the lights went out and all was calm and quiet and still, I could hear her singing, barely above a whisper,

about a garden where Jesus was walking, or the wind and the waves that obeyed his command, or a Shepherd who went to find the sheep that was lost. And there was something *about* that that made me feel safe and warm ... and that all would be well. And I know it sounds silly, but that feeling, that assurance, was always close by.

But when I was sixteen, my grandmother died. And all of that ended. The singing was gone. I cupped my hand behind all the memories and all the hurt and all the sadness I felt, but it was gone. The song had ended and she was just ... gone. No longer part of my life. Just gone.

Well ... that's the first part of the story. The second part came about sixteen years later, when we were in Clarksburg. I haven't told you a lot about Clarksburg, really, because things weren't easy there. I was at Christ Church, which wasn't a big church, really. We had about a hundred on Sundays. But during those four years, I had more than eighty funerals. They weren't all church members, mind you. But a good many of them were. And it was discouraging -- and it was depressing.

Well, every year we gather in Wesley Chapel for Annual Conference. And our first service together in those days was a memorial service for all the clergy and spouses who had died during the year. And every year the service ended with Holy Communion. It's kind of like the Conference's All Saints Day, in a way.

And Bishop Ives preached the sermon that day and the choir sang. And he broke the bread and blessed the cup. And people came forward to share the Lord's Supper. And as people came forward we sang. Nearly two thousand people sang the way Methodists sing. And that's when it happened. As we were singing and as people were coming to the Lord's table, I could hear it again. I didn't see anything with my eyes, or hear with my ears. But somewhere inside I heard *other* voices ... as if the saints in heaven were sharing this blessed communion. And somewhere *in here* I could hear the singing. And I knew they were there. That we were connected. Not just my grandmother, mind you. But Ray and Dale and so many others who had gone on before ... lifting their voices

together as one. And they seemed so close I could almost touch them....

It's what we call the Communion of the Saints, you know -- of saints above and saints below, all singing praise to the One who never gives up and who never lets go. And why shouldn't it be that way? For they are with God and God is with us.

O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine! we sang. And the message was loud and clear: When the shadows fall and the hard times come, and when life just doesn't make sense, hold on. Hold on to your faith. For someday, somehow the tables will turn. And suffering and sorrow and pain and death will be no more... And we will join our voices in the great congregation to sing our unending praise to this extraordinary God.

Oh ... **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No in all these things**

we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENEN, OBLSB

