

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "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."¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (459 words)

Last week, I came across an article in *Plough Magazine*. Entitled "The Church is Other People," it recounts what writer and Episcopal priest Noah Van Neil explains he is "missing and longing for: Touch. Connection. Community."

As a priest, he knows well that ours is an incarnational faith. As a human, he seems to know why this would speak to something deeper even than religion.

He notes that, for starters, Jesus is remembered as being "almost always with people. From the outset of his ministry he recruits disciples to follow him. He brings huge crowds together to teach. He travels with people and enters their houses to eat and stay with them; he gets right up

into their faces to touch and heal them; he washes their feet; he puts their children on his knee. Close contact with other human beings, to communicate the presence and power of God, is essential to the movement he founded.”

Then there’s Paul, the earliest founder of so many congregations of the Church. For him, “the keystone of the Christian way was the *ekklesia*, the communal gathering in which one could practice, in the flesh, a way of being together, existing primarily *with* and *for* one another. This gathering was the core unit of the faith, and he spilled much ink trying to keep those disparate units together, for without those bodies, there was no Body of Christ.”

With this as its start, it’s clear “Christian discipleship was never meant to be an isolated endeavor. It has always meant creation of, participation in, and care for community. One’s individual relationship with God is expected to shape how one functions in relationship with others. So, facilitating and nurturing real, physical connections between people is a critical function of the church.”

All this feeds, and is fed by, our central doctrine, that of the Incarnation. “An incarnational understanding of the world holds that the wondrous works of God are almost always revealed in and through bodies...” What’s more, “When we [gather with others to] occupy a common space, there is energy, electricity; a spirit is kindled. Physical presence matters in ways that are impossible to measure but impossible to deny.”

For all this, “in an increasingly fragmented world, [that] the church remains one of the few entities whose express intent is to create close contact with other people” is cause for pride, or at least for wonder and gratitude.

These days, of course, it’s also cause for grief.

Van Neil writes, “It’s going to be a long time before we’re all holding hands again or sharing the same air. This is spiritual starvation as well as social—so long as we must remain physically distant, the church cannot be what it was created to be. Until we can all gather again in person, to eat and sing and pray and work, the Body of Christ is not whole: it is wounded. That is not to say the church cannot be helpful and comforting and do good work in this time. But what people are longing for right now—touch, community, connection—are precisely the things we were made to give them, and cannot.”

“It is hard to overstate just how frustrating this is...”

“And none of the options we’re presently offered for proceeding can completely alleviate that frustration. Reopening churches as usual, without any restrictions, gives us the gift of incarnated community but jeopardizes the very bodies we seek to celebrate as revelations of the divine...

“Another option is to open to very small groups of people, none of whom can be at high risk, ...and to undertake rigorous screening, distancing, and safety protocols – no singing, no touching, no communion – before we can worship ‘together.’ This provides a minimally satisfying in-person worship experience. [But it also] emphasizes current fractures in the community [. It also emphasizes those persistent] feelings of division and loneliness.

“Yet another approach is not to reopen at all until the virus is defeated, using instead livestream or recorded services, insisting that the church can keep being the church without the physical gathering that has always been at its heart. So, calendars are filled with Zoom calls, Sunday worship is streamed, and meanwhile bodies languish in isolation.” And as for those who might wander in, joining up on the spur of a moment or the spontaneous call of the Spirit: nope, for them there’s no way in.

So, “...instead of a satisfying way forward, we are left with a desire that cannot be met. An absence that cannot be filled. A yearning that is perpetual.

“But,” Ven Neil wonders, which I’ve been wondering as well, “what if that were its own instructive place to dwell?” What if this yearning, this un-fulfillment, were a place where the Spirit has something especial to work in our midst? We’re a people who spend so little time unfulfilled. We’re unusual that way in the course of human history. We tend to get what we want when we want it. Our economic wealth, our ease at getting from place to place, the internet, all have us more and more able to get what we want at exactly the moment we want it. There are exceptions among us, of course. But there it is: next-day delivery, door-dash, online streaming of almost anything you can imagine and lots of stuff you can’t, or wouldn’t have been able to prior to TikTok and YouTube.

Here, by stark contrast, is what it feels like to wait, and to wait for something that’s not just the pizza you ordered or for the internet to stop glitching. Here, by contrast, is what unfulfillment feels like—a disembodied voice over a podcast, which feels close, might even envelope you as the

spoken voice can, but can't really hold you. [A cold sanctuary, masked congregants, the desire to offer someone refreshments at coffee hour and not being safe to do so.]

Numbers are going up.

Today is All Saints' Day. To be honest, it's one of those church holidays that always felt a little too abstract for me. I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't know how to enter it. Those saints felt so far away, and the purported trials of life that makes for saints always felt a little too notional to the likes of me, child of North Hampton, New Hampshire, eater of three square meals a day, owner of pets. I could always imagine the sorts of things *they* might have lived through, those saints of old. But I've always had a fairly easy life.

That's a weird thing to complain about.

Now, though. Today, I get it. The idea of a great multitude, gathered in thanks and praise waiting on the other side of a time of trial: I get it. I also get that this gathered multitude might be a supernatural gathering, a gathering of those who've died and now risen, having made the move from life to Life, having at last been made to gather at that great feast long promised. But it also might be us, a more mundane gathering, the fullness of the Church gathered once COVID is under control and the community we yearn for means a contagion of the Holy Spirit and only that.

Meanwhile, we wait, while our witness is less fulfilling but more crucial than most of us have known in our lifetimes.

So, to all you saints who have come this far in the time of COVID, I offer my thanks and praise, To all you who have remained so faithful as to gather however we can—via podcast, via Zoom, or in increasingly inclement side-yards or very chilly churches under such restrictive restrictions—all to bear witness to the God who persists just like you, and who do so knowing that we have another long time ahead of us before we gather as the multitude we long to be, thanks and praise to you and for you. Please know that, before the saints of old were a multitude, in our remembering and celebrating, they were a thin and often lonely lot. But, like them, we will be a multitude again—gathered in our meetinghouse where doors are thrown open to gather any and all who yearn for love embodied to come in. We will be a multitude again, though in the Berkshires a multitude is still a relatively small number. We will though be many because love embodied and

lived out is just too appealing for people to refuse for long. We simply must endure together to the time when that appeal can attract and gather in.

It will happen.

We must endure.

Thanks be to God.