

Homily – The Communion of Saints

Rob Keim

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Over the past week I have been re-exploring my family tree. There is an amazing amount of information at the website Ancestry.com, and I have parts of my tree that go back more than seven hundred years. And, nine generations ago, back in the seventeenth century one of my ancestors, married someone with the last name of Diehl, Jeff's last name. We don't yet know whether our marriage is the second time our families have intermingled. I restarted on the family tree because I am reading one of my dad's favorite books, "The Johnstown Flood" by historian David McCullough. Back in 1889 a dam broke and more than 2200 people were killed in the subsequent flooding. This was the worst disaster in U.S. history until the hurricane in Galveston, Texas in 1900 and then 911 in 2001. Both of my dad's parents are from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and we used to vacation their each summer with my grandparents. I still have family in Johnstown, and I have never heard if my ancestors were impacted by the Flood. So I have been back on Ancestry.com doing research and being surrounded by hundreds of my ancestors.

And, that is what we are celebrating today. We are surrounded by our ancestors and the communion of saints. With our celebration of All Saints we are remembering those special men and women who have been declared extra holy by our church. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Theresa of Avila are just two of these famous saints of our church. And, it also includes Harriet Tubman of the underground railroad, and Fr. Thomas Merton, the mystic and spiritual writer. We have many saintly role models who can lead us on our own life journeys.

And today we are also celebrating the feast of All Souls. With this feast we remember all of those who have died and are now in life eternal with God. This includes all of our loved ones and all of our ancestors. Whether you have put their photo over on our side altar or not, we celebrate those who have died. And, we should always remember that someday you and I will be celebrated on All Souls Day because the mortality rate for us all still hovers very close to one hundred percent.

Now together, as we celebrate these two holidays we see that they have at least three things in common. First, and perhaps it need not to be said, the saints and the souls are all dead. They have all entered into life eternal with God. Second, we can learn something from both the saints and the souls. They are role models for us in this journey through life and in our spiritual journeys to be in union with God and connected to all that God has made.

I think this is the core realization of every saint and soul. Saints see things in their connectedness and wholeness. They don't see things as separate. It's all one, and yet like the Trinity, it is also different. What you do to another, you do to yourself; how you love yourself is how you love your neighbor; how you love God is how you love yourself; how you love yourself is how you love God. How you do anything is how you do everything.

And finally the saints and souls remind us of time. With these two feast days, we are invited to be aware of deep time—that is, past, present, and future time gathered into one especially holy moment. We are reminded that our ancestors are still in us and work with us and through us. We call it the “communion of saints.” We have an “intergenerational community of the living and the dead stretching across time and space and comprised our family tree and of all who are made holy by the Spirit of God.” Together the living and the dead form one community of memory and hope. We form a holy people touched with the fire of the Spirit, summoned to go forth as companions bringing the face of divine compassion into everyday life and the great struggles of history, wrestling with evil, and delighting even now when fragments of justice, peace, and healing gain however small a foothold.

Now, today we are going to deviate from our normal practice for a sermon. Today, we are going to move into a guided meditation practice called The Seven Homecomings. This is a contemplative practice that will take about seven minutes and in it we will surround ourselves with our own personal “circle of care.” I will guide you through this, and at times there will twenty short seconds of silence for you to reflect.

So, to begin put your feet flat on the floor and put your hands in your lap or on your legs. Now, close your eyes and take three deep breaths, a deep breath in, and out. And a second breath in and out. And a third in and out.

Our first homecoming meditation is to think about people who have been your guides through life. Reflect on any being who has been a guide, a teacher, a mentor, an adviser, or an elder for you. Reflect on the people in your life whom you've gone to for guidance and support. . . . Invite them to gather around you in a circle and say welcome to them. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to thinking about and being held by your guides.

The second homecoming is your wisdom texts. Reflect on any text that has helped you to deepen your wisdom. These texts can include any writing, books, teachings, sacred Scriptures . . . that have helped you to experience clarity, openness, love, and compassion. . . . Say welcome to your texts. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to

thinking about and being held by your wisdom texts.

The third homecoming is community. Begin by reflecting about the communities, groups, and spaces where you experience love or the feeling of being accepted and supported in being happy. . . . Where do you feel safe to love? Where are you being loved? . . . Say welcome to your communities. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to being held by your communities.

The fourth homecoming is your ancestors. Begin by reflecting on those ancestors who have wanted the best for you, including wanting you to be happy and safe. You don't need to know who those ancestors are. . . . As you invite your ancestors, remember that you too are in the process of becoming an ancestor. . . . Say welcome to your ancestors. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to being held by your ancestors.

The fifth homecoming is the earth. Begin by reflecting on . . . how the earth sustains your life and the lives of countless others. . . . Coming home to the earth means touching the earth, acknowledging the earth . . . and allowing it to hold you and, as it holds you, understanding that it is loving you as well. . . . Say welcome to the earth. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to being held by the earth.

The sixth homecoming is yourself. Begin by reflecting on your experiences of your mind and body. Consider how your experiences are valuable, important, and crucial. Invite all the parts of yourself into your awareness, including the parts of yourself that seem too ugly or overwhelming. . . . Say welcome to yourself. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to yourself. . . .

Finally, the seventh homecoming is God. Begin by reflecting on the generosity of God as something that helps you to have the space to be with yourself. . . . Reflect on how you can embrace God as a friend and/or lover who is invested in your health and well-being. . . . Say welcome to the God. Relax. Inhale. Exhale and come home to being held by God.

Now imagine that your circle of benefactors begins to dissolve into white light, and gather that white light into your heart center. Rest your mind and relax.

And now wiggle your feet and your toes. Wiggle them a little more, and open your eyes to see the world around you.

This spiritual exercise is called the Seven Homecomings and it is intended to remind us that we are all connected. And, I have two observations about this practice. First, you have a lot of support to come home to. We are all blessed in many ways. My second observation is that contemplation often surfaces some negative stuff. This is

normal but it is also the reason so many don't do contemplation. We don't want to surface the negative stuff. It may not be the trauma of a tragedy like the Johnstown flood. It may be more of the everyday stuff of your family tree. If you found the negative stuff was too much then you have some healing work to do. Dcn. Susan and I are available if you would like some guidance about that healing. Your birthright is a beautiful diamond that is already inside of you. Christ is in you whether you know it or not. Christ, that second part of the Trinity is throughout all of time and space. Christ is in all and around all. May we all come home to that beauty that God has already created in us. May we be in union with the communion of saints and connected to God.