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All Saints' Sunday: Revelation 21:1-6a
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Preacher Fred Craddock tells this story about a baptism he experienced while serving a small mission church in a small town in Tennessee. He said, It was the custom in that church at Easter to have a baptismal service, and it was held at the lake on Easter evening at sundown. After all the candidates had been baptized in the lake, everyone changed into dry clothes and gathered around a fire. Once we were all around the fire, one parishioner always introduced the new people. He gave their names, where they lived and their work. The newly baptized people stayed close to the warmth of the fire. Then the rest of the church members gathered around them in a circle. The next part of the ritual was that each person around the circle gave her or his name and said,

“My name is ...and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing, call on me.”

“My name is ...If you ever need anybody to chop wood, call on me.”

“My name is ...If you ever need anybody to babysit, call on me.”

“My name is ...If you ever need anybody to repair your house, call on me.”

“My name is ...If you ever need anybody to sit with the sick, call on me.”

“My name is ...If you ever need a car to go to town, call on me.”

And around the circle we went.

We cooked dinner and ate together. We sang. Then we had a square dance.

“Finally . . . a parishioner named Percy Miller, with thumbs in his bibbed overalls, would stand up and say, ‘It’s time to go.’ And everybody left. He lingered behind, and with his big shoe kicked sand over the dying fire. . . He looked at me and said, “[You know], folks don’t ever get any closer than this.” In that community, their name for that kind of togetherness is “church.” They call that “church.”

We call that Church.

Today, on All Saints' Day, we celebrate the fact that because of God's love for us, because of God's gift of the church to us, we are never ever, ever alone. Through baptism, we become part of the Church, the body of Christ, the communion of Saints that exists throughout all time. We are never alone. We are knit together in one fellowship, brought into one unending circle, an expanding circle, where there is always room for more, a circle where each one gathered is valuable and precious in the sight of God, each one has gifts to be discovered and offered, each belongs.

And here's more: even when we experience death, even when we go on to the fullness of the life to come, we stay connected with this circle.

Today we celebrate that our hope that someday we will all be part of a great gathering in heaven. Our reading from Revelation describes it this way: imagine a great gathering of all peoples and nations around the throne of God. Hear this amazing promise: "See, the home of God is among mortals." God -- God's very self -- will be with us. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. . . See I am making all things new . . . These words are trustworthy and true."

At some times and in some places, we are reminded of these things that are trustworthy and true. As Christians we believe that there is more here than meets the eye. We get glimpses into the larger reality of which we are a part, a fullness and abundance that is already around us, but is not yet fully known by us. Like being part of a whole communion of saints -- those living, those who have gone on to heaven before us, those who have not yet been born. Like the reality of a God who is present with us, but not seen, who makes Godself known to us in ordinary things like water and words, bread and wine.

In Celtic tradition, places that give us an opening into the wonder and magnificence of God's presence and the divine realm are called "Thin places," places where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted and one is able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God. Poet Sharlande Sledge wrote this:

"Thin places," the Celts call this space,
Both seen and unseen,
Where the door between this world

And the next is cracked open for a moment
 And the light is not all on the other side.
 God shaped space. Holy.ⁱ

There are “thin places” all around us. Holy Communion, the Eucharist, is one of those times that can be a “thin place” for us. In the prayer of consecration, where ordinary bread and ordinary wine are made holy, blessed, broken, offered as Jesus himself for us – in this prayer we say, “we praise you, joining our voices with angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name, Holy, Holy, Holy Lord.” In this moment, we -- the living here on this side of the veil, join with all those living on the other, to praise our God. Our prayers are lifted along with the prayers of the angels and all the saints – ordinary and extraordinary, those we have known, and those we will meet in heaven – all intertwined in the church’s feast of unity with the whole people of God and with Jesus Christ, who promises to be present with us every time we receive. The door between this world / And the next is cracked open for a moment / And the light is not all on the other side.

We are never alone.

Today some parents are entrusting their children into this wide, wide circle of love, into the communion of saints that stretches further back and further forward than we can imagine. In bringing their children for baptism, they are saying yes to the reality of God’s presence with us, yes to the reality of God’s love for us, known especially in the love of Jesus Christ, a love that would pour itself out so that not even death can separate us from the love of God. A love that is with us and around us always, even when we may feel we are most alone. Like a loving mother or father reaching out to comfort a frightened child, God takes us by the hand and says, You are never alone. Don’t worry. I’ll go with you.

There is a prayer, attributed to St. Patrick, that speaks of God’s love in Christ surrounding us, present with us in every circumstance. (The choir will sing this prayer following the baptisms this morning. You can find it in Hymnal 1982 as part of Hymn 370, St. Patrick’s Breastplate). The prayer goes like this:

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before
 me,

Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and
stranger.

We are never alone.

When our worship service ends this morning, we will gather in a circle around our church building. I hope all of you will take the few moments it will take to join hands and wish each other God's peace. We gather in a circle to be reminded that God's love encircles and surrounds us always. We join hands to remember that God gives us the presence of one another to be fellow pilgrims on our journey through this life, people who need one another, and pledge to be here for one another as members of this community – to shine Christ's love to one another, in St. Patrick's words, in hearts of all who love us, in words of friend and stranger. We join hands because we remember that in welcoming one another, we welcome Christ's presence, and we can always expand the circle, welcoming more and more into the warmth of Christ's love. Our circle will face in first, where we will see one another and this place where we worship, this place that reminds us to seek out the other "thin places" that are all around us. Then, we will turn outward, facing out towards our larger community, because God has called us to be a church – Christ's body for the world, to offer God's love to everyone. I hope you will join our circle of hands around St. Anne's. God has already joined you into the circle of all the saints.

You are never alone.

We call that Church.

ⁱ I found this poem in a post by Sylvia Maddox at
<http://www.explorefaith.org/mystery/mysteryThinPlaces.html>