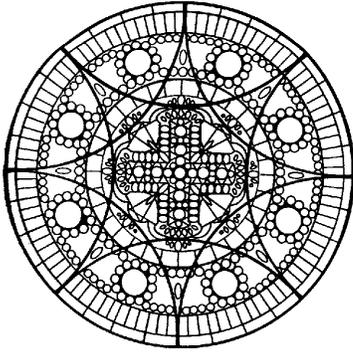


# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC

Aurora Illinois



HOLY GHOSTS

November 4, 2018

Revelation 7.9-17

*In a vision, I saw 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. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,*

*“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

*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, singing,*

*“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”*

*Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “These who are robed in white are they who have come out of the great ordeal, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship God day and night within God’s temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.*

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;*

*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.”*

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day. It is the day we remember those saints of our lives who have gone on before us. Some we know; some we don’t know. But all of us owe our lives to those who have gone before us: those who gave us life, those who gave their lives so we could live in a free nation, those who sacrificed of themselves so we could have a church and a building, those who provided for us education and mentoring, nurturing, and direction.

The image in Revelation presents a strikingly inclusive view of the saints gathered before God. The multitude is so large, no one could count the number of people, and it is made up of people from all nations, races, and classes; no category is excluded in the communion of All Saints. Those who wash their robes in the blood of the lamb are those who are not afraid to get their robes dirty for the sake of truth. The oxymoron is that the blood of the executed Jesus makes the robes white. In the midst of death and destruction, some people have with integrity refused to conform to the negative aspects of the prevailing culture. They are willing to pay the price for their convictions.

These have followed the Jesus who, in full view of the grave, did not back down from his conviction that God's presence was available to everyone, this being such a radical and threatening tenet of faith for those in political control, they murdered him. Ever since, death and the grave have been at the heart of our faith. Death was not overcome by a declaration; it was overcome by dying. Death had to be faced, not fled. Cemeteries are the hallowed ground of that confrontation.

What evolved into All Saints' Day, celebrated on November, 1, began in a cemetery. The burial places of martyrs were understandably revered by early Christians. The evening before All Saints' Day, known as All Hallows' Eve, or Halloween as we've come to know it, was a time to dress up like ghosts from the grave and dance over the tomb with life that laughs in the face of death. These two holidays proclaim that the cemetery, site of death's decisive act, has been made a scene of joy.

Theologian Paul Tillich, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, refers to a story told at the Nuremberg war-crimes trials. A witness appeared who had lived for a time in a cemetery in Vilna, Poland, with other escapees from the gas chambers. This witness wrote poems, one of which was about a young woman who had given birth in a grave, assisted by an 80-year-old gravedigger. Wrapped in a linen shroud, and hearing the first cry of this baby, the old man prayed, "Great God, you have finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else other than the Messiah can be born in a grave?" (John Weborg. *The Christian Century*, Nov 2, 1988)

Saints are saints because they gave of themselves. They didn't stop to ask, "can I afford this?" They didn't stop to ask, "what percentage over last year do you want?" They didn't stop to ask, "What are others giving?" They gave because they could do nothing else. Their treasures were where their hearts were. They gave from what they had, and even from what they didn't have. Can you think of saints in your life like that? Can you imagine yourself being that kind of saint to someone who will survive you?

Last Friday a number of us attended the Shabbat service at Temple B'nai Israel in solidarity with our Jewish sisters and brothers following the horrendous massacre a week ago at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. At this Aurora service, Rabbi Ed Friedman read the following poem, reminding us of our privilege and responsibility to be the saints that are willing to take a stand against the evil of prejudice and hatred that has reared its ugly head in a culture that increasingly deifies those who hate and kill.

### **WHEN EVIL DARKENS OUR WORLD**

When evil darkens our world, let us be the bearers of light.

When fists are clenched in self-righteous rage, let our hands be open for the sake of peace.

When injustice slams doors on the ill, the poor, the old, and the stranger, let us pry the doors open.

Where shelter is lacking, let us be builders.

Where food and clothing are needed, let us be providers.

Where knowledge is denied, let us be champions of learning.

When dissent is stifled, let our voices speak truth to power.

When the earth and its creatures are threatened, let us be their guardians.

When bias, greed, and bigotry erode our country's values, let us proclaim liberty throughout the land.

In the places where no one acts like a human being,  
let us bring courage;  
let us bring compassion;  
let us bring humanity

(Chaim Stern, from *Mishkan HaNefesh*: Machzor for the Days of Awe.)

The saints dance over the grave in costumes of the good, the bad, and the ugly. The saints inspire us to our very best, to giving our utmost, for from the other side they remind us that death is not the final word. The saints encourage us to take the bold plunge into the risky business of being a community of faith, to not worry about staying clean and pure but to immerse ourselves in that which gets us dirty for love's sake. Today we are reminded again of our need to don costumes of faith and dance over the gravestones of the impossible, for this is the stuff of saints and holy ghosts.

–Gary L. McCann

