



“The Perfect Family Reunion”
Scripture – Isaiah 25:6-9
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
November 3, 2019; All Saints’ Sunday

Imagine this: The perfect family reunion.

I’m not talking about the Thanksgiving Dinner where the conversation is civil as everyone enjoys turkey and sweet potatoes but, then, dissolves into political debates over pumpkin pie. I’m talking about the *ideal* family reunion ... one where the stars miraculously align so that every far-flung family member — even your niece who lives in Tokyo! — everyone manages to fly in. At this family reunion, the old hurts manage to fade into the background enough that, for once, you find yourself enjoying the company of your siblings and cousins. And even Uncle Louis is on his best behavior. Think big — outside the bounds of space and time. At this family reunion, anything goes.

Take a moment to picture the scene: Maybe you’ve gathered at that state park in the mountains of North Carolina — the one that has provided both stage and scenery for every family reunion for the last forty years ... Or you’re at the beach house where you spent summers as a kid. You and your cousins can’t wait to pedal into town to pick up some salt-water taffy, just like you did back in the day ... Maybe everyone has descended on your grandmother’s house. It’s just as you remember it; nothing has changed since the last Christmas you were here!

You arrive to find the table is spread. There’s Aunt Sarah’s famous mac-n-cheese! (Oh, there was a time when that was the only thing you would eat.) And your favorite jello salad! You wonder how many uncles had to coax and cajole it before it broke free from its mold. Looks like the jello survived the ordeal ... mostly. And, of course, there’s your great grandmother’s tomato aspic. You’ve never been much of a fan, but everyone else seems to like it. Grandma has made her deviled eggs — her perfect deviled eggs. Not too much mustard, just enough paprika. The ones you’ve never been able to re-create because no one asked for the secret before Grandma died.

And your cousin has brought an apple pie from that bakery you always loved — the one that closed down years ago. But you can still smell the butter and the cinnamon like it was yesterday. Smells like Thanksgiving.

Your mouth is watering; your stomach’s beginning to grumble. You tear your eyes from the table and look around to see who else has arrived.

Here comes Grandpa — no doubt walking over to plant one of his infamous slobbery kisses on your cheek. You’ll groan and grimace with the best of ’em, but deep down you find his signature greeting endearing. Plus, no family reunion would be complete without one of Grandpa’s slobbery kisses.

And there's your cousin, looking healthy and alert — just like you remember her before the drugs decimated her body and devastated her mind.

At this family reunion your aunt is camped out in front of the fire, rather than confined to the bed where she is fighting, but mostly dying of cancer. And your brother, who never makes it home because of that soul-crushing job, is here for an entire week. And, wonder of wonders, there's the great-grandfather you never met, because the Great Depression stole first his livelihood, and then his life.

At this family reunion, your namesake (who passed away when you were five) gets to hold her great-great-great-granddaughter — the youngest in the family to carry her name. You feel overwhelmed by the love of that moment.

I told you — think BIG.

It's lovely to ponder — this, the perfect family reunion. But of course, this reunion could never happen. Not in this life, anyway. That age-old enemy — death — lurks around the edges of every family like a thief in the night, snatching away both the beleaguered and the beloved, and — eventually — our very breath. Death, with its insatiable appetite, peels away cherished ones from the tables where they belong, leaving us with empty chairs and aching hearts. This reunion could never happen because — despite our hope in the God of Resurrection — death is very, very real.

I'm not just speaking of the death that snuffs out this earthly life; the death that shrouds this All Saints' Sunday, as we remember those our church family has lost this year, and so many others whom we carry in our hearts. Lord knows this physical death is hard enough to bear. But there's a shadow that looms even larger: The Power of Death — what preacher and professor, Tom Long, calls Death with a capital D.¹ Capital-D-Death is a destructive force that tears away at God's vision for creation; it's "the enemy of all that God wills for life."²

Capital-D-Death accounts for so much of the suffering that plagues our world, our communities, our families ...

The cancer that ate away at your mother's soul as well as her body, until it drained every last ounce of the joy and vigor she once brought to life. The addiction that stole your father away, so that — even when he was home — he was never really there. The endless conflicts that kept your brother deployed to far-off lands. The deep seated resentments that drive the emotional distance between you and your sister. Yes, this shadow looms large. It always has.

Even Scripture bears witness to the heartache and hopelessness wrought by the forces of death. When God raises up the Prophet Isaiah, Death-with-a-capital-D shows its face as nations lift up swords against nations, leaving families broken and fields barren and the covenant community scattered to the ends of the earth (or, at least, to the corners of the Babylonian Empire). Death with- a-capital-D is nothing new for people of faith.

Yet into this very age — just when the forces of death seem to rule the day, God offers a word of hope to a people trapped in chaos.

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And [God] will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
[God] will swallow up death forever.*

On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will prepare a banquet — a lavish feast where cups runneth over and hunger is sated. People from every nation will stream to this mountain, to the House of the Lord. From the farthest reaches they come, weary from the journey but eager — so eager — because they know they are coming home.

Imagine: Everyone arrives to find the table is spread. There's mac-n-cheese that tastes just like it did when you were little. And apple pie, rich with the flavors of butter and cinnamon. And jello salad that has escaped, unscathed, from the mold.

And there is enough — enough for everyone to eat and be filled ... Which is a good thing because *all* peoples, *all* nations — the whole family of God — has gathered from east and west and north and south to feast at the table of our Lord. Everyone comes home for this banquet: The brother who's been off at war, the father you've never quite forgiven, the sister you've resented for most of your life. At this table divisions are erased and even the most painful hurts are healed, as the family gathers to share the feast.

And this reunion is possible because of one miraculous fact: God has promised to swallow up death forever. Death — with its voracious appetite, death — with its stealthy ways — death is no match for the God of Life. On this mountain, God will destroy every power that threatens to destroy us, so that we no longer have cause for mourning or crying or pain. On this mountain, God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

It's lovely to ponder — this family reunion in the household of God.

But — for people of faith — it's more than a lovely image, an optimist's fantasy, a dreamer's dream. It's more than a maudlin movie script offered as a salve for aching hearts. This abundant feast is a promise set forth by the God who will swallow up — no, who *has* swallowed up death forever.

For the same God who spoke through Isaiah to offer hope to a people shrouded in darkness has defeated death. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has shattered the power of death and opened the way to eternal life, so that even at the grave we can boldly sing: "Alleluia, alleluia!" Yes, my friends — even when Death's specter seems to hold sway, we have hope in the God of Life.

And today, as we remember and grieve the saints who no longer sit at our family tables, we have hope that the One who has overcome the power of death now prepares a feast for the whole communion of saints.

At this heavenly banquet the entire family of God gathers at the table. There's grandma with her perfect deviled eggs, and grandpa eager to plant a slobbery kiss on your cheek. And there's your namesake, who's itchin' to get her hands on that baby. There's everyone we have loved and lost — those who joined the church triumphant only days ago, those who've been at the banquet feast for a long time. They're all there, gathered at the table ... enjoying the family reunion for the household of God.

At this heavenly banquet, the promise of God has come true: Death has been swallowed up forever. Mourning and crying and pain have ceased. There are no more tears to wipe away.

Yes, in some ways, this banquet — this perfect family reunion — could never happen. Not in this life, anyway.

But we do get a foretaste whenever we gather here to feast on the bread of heaven, to drink from the cup of new life. Because, at this table, the veil between earth and heaven lifts for a sacred moment, and we are invited to take our place with the whole communion of saints, with all the faithful of every time and place. They're all here — the pastors who baptized us, the Sunday school teachers who taught us the stories of Jesus. They're all here — the grandparents who shaped us, the children we buried long before their time. They're all here — all the saints we carry in our hearts, the whole, beloved family of God.

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines ...
And [God] will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples ...
[God] will swallow up death forever ...
The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.*

The feast is ready. So come — let us take our place among the saints. Our family is waiting to welcome us.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing — The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 38.
2. Ibid.

All Saints prayer 2019 by Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of Heaven and earth, the One from whom we come and the One to whom we shall go, we give you thanks for your precious gift of life and for opportunities to build loving bonds with family and friends. On this All Saints Sunday, we pause to focus our thoughts on the saints of our lives and to give thanks for:

The ones who prompted us to pursue a spiritual life...
The ones who taught us the importance of honesty...
The ones who were generous with us and inspired us to nurture a generous spirit...
The ones who loved us even when we were not all that lovable...
The ones who made us laugh...
The ones who brought out the best in us...
The ones who comforted us when life was oppressive and grueling...
The ones who inspired us to help those for whom life is harsh...
The ones who trusted us and by doing so, motivated us to become trustworthy...
The ones who revealed to us the mighty power of forgiveness...
The ones who encouraged us to be determined and never give up...
The ones who helped us discover our purpose...
The ones who challenged us to work for a just cause...
The ones who showed us where to find happiness and true joy...

Everlasting God, we give thanks for those who died during the past year whom we now remember and name:

~~Names of the Westminster saints are read~~

Mighty God, as we remember our loved ones who now dwell with you in your eternal kingdom, we express our gratitude for the special ways they touched our lives and for the part of them that will continue to live through us.

And as we share this sacrament, may we be united with Christ and with his living body, the church, and may we commit ourselves to sharing his love with the world.

Joining our voices as one, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.