

# **MY REPERTOIRE: HYMNS FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF OUR FAITH**

## **7. “For All the Saints”**

**Romans 14:7-9**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

**The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet**

**November 5, 2017 - All Saints Sunday**

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I would like to answer for you this morning the question about which almost all of us have wondered at some point in our lives, if not every day. What happens to us when we die? All Saints Sunday seems as good a time as any to tackle the question since all of us have loved ones who have died and, believe it or not, we, too, one day will pass on from this life. In the event you are harboring a massive case of denial, Hebrews 9:27 in the New Testament confirms the prognosis, saying, “It is appointed for all mortals once to die.”

So, the question: What happens to us when we die? My answer? I don’t know. But neither does anyone else. There are people who string together various verses of scripture and say they know. They don’t. We also have ad nauseum accounts from people who have had near death experiences and draw conclusions. The problem is that *near* death is not the same as death just as nearly falling down the stairs is not falling down the stairs. Periodically, a book bursts on the scene by someone purporting to have been to heaven and back who claims to speak authoritatively about what happens when we die. If you believe their stories, do not under any condition talk to anyone trying to sell you an ice castle in the Sahara or tickets to a World Series featuring the Philadelphia Phillies. There are no such things just as there are no definitive descriptions of what happens to us when we die.

The best we can do is to turn to St. Paul who said as much as we can say about what happens when we die. Writing to the church in Rome, Paul said buoyantly, *“If we live, we live unto the Lord; if we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live, therefore, or whether we die, we belong*

*to the Lord.*” That’s it. That is the most we know. But isn’t that enough and more than enough?!

One of the worst feelings I had after my daughter, Katy, died was that I had not gone before her through the door, the process, the procedure or whatever it is that happens when we die. I was her father and I could not shake the sense I should have been there first to help her through, to welcome her, to tell her it will be all right. I hated the thought she had to cross the river without me and before me.

I was inconsolable about it, really, until I allowed the words of Paul to speak their deep truth to me. *“If we live, we live unto the Lord; if we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live, therefore, or whether we die, we belong to the Lord.”* Even though I could not be with Katy when she slipped through the bonds of earth, Paul reminded me that as she belonged to the Lord in life she belongs to the Lord in death and nothing can separate her from the love of God. As much as I loved her, I know God’s love is greater than mine and so I find solace in trusting that Katy did not go unaccompanied into that next grand adventure that awaited her and that she is eternally safe in God.

One of the loveliest doctrines of the church is what we call “the communion of saints.” (Remember, we are defining saints in the Protestant sense of the word as Paul does - not so-called special people set apart for veneration but church members and children of God and people who are being sanctified, “saintified,” by the Holy Spirit. It is a very wide swath.) The doctrine affirms that our saints and loved ones are not finally lost to us.

From time to time we can sense their presence in good ways. We cannot prove it is “them” and not our wishful projections, except deep in our bones we know. And why would St. Paul have said in 1 Corinthians 13 that *“love never ends”* if there is no continuing connection? Love requires relationship.

A week or so before my father died, he said, *“I feel Katy rubbing my arm and my back.”* Was it really Katy? I cannot confirm it, of course. But it was not something my father would have said, if he did not believe it with all his heart. And why could it not be so? I wonder if our tendency to doubt such things is not at its root a repudiation of God. Are not all things possible with God? In the gospel of John, Jesus asks, *“Do you believe it?”*<sup>1</sup>

Some people contend that when this life ends, it is all over. This is it. There is nothing more after this life and to think otherwise, they say, is absurd. To whom I rather un-pastorally and

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:31 and Matthew 9:28

quickly retort, “*You’re absurd!*” What is absurd is to think that with all of the beauty and wonderment in this life, the complexity and intricacy of it, with the lessons we learn and the wisdom we accumulate that it all goes for naught when we die. With the grace and mercy we experience in this life, what would make us think there is any less when we die? Why would we think that the love of God we experience in this life would be withheld from us when we die?

The psalmist testifies that “*even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me*” and “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*”<sup>2</sup> Jesus himself said, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.*”<sup>3</sup>

Scripture, creed (“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints...”),<sup>4</sup> and our experience all point to the reality of the fellowship of saints on earth and in heaven. The veil is thin between them and those who have gone before us, though absent in the body, still mystically and inscrutably are with us in the spirit.

We still bear in this congregation the influence of many saints who have gathered in these pews and served the gospel of love through the years. Not their physical presence, of course, but they all are here in spirit and truth. Who and what they were are at least a part of who and what we are. Have you seen in our church library the piece of blackboard on which an elder named James Weir wrote about Jesus on his last earthly Sunday in March of 1878? “*Leaving us an example that ye shall follow his steps*”<sup>5</sup> were the words he bequeathed to us. (How cool is it that Mr. Weir had been so rich a part of our church’s life that the session of the church at the time saw fit to saw apart a chalkboard with his writing on it and place it under glass to memorialize him?!)

The good news is that James Weir and so many others remain with us in the communion of saints. But here is the thing: Our saints are not here only in our memory even as we believe that in the sacrament of Holy Communion the presence of Christ is more than a memory and the Lord’s Supper is more than a memorial meal. We believe Christ is really, spiritually present with us in the bread and the cup. Just so, the saints are really, spiritually present with us, too.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:4,6

<sup>3</sup> John 14:1-3

<sup>4</sup> From the Apostles’ Creed

<sup>5</sup> James W. Weir was the Superintendent of the Market Square Sunday School from 1835-1878 and wrote the cited inscription on his last earthly Sunday, March 14, 1878. The actual piece of blackboard has been encased and hangs in our church library.

Our faith tells us that when we die we are given new and glorious resurrection lives.<sup>6</sup> Bob Hope may be thankful for the memories but we are promised more than that. It is why the church celebrates the communion of saints. When we die we do not stay dead. We are raised into life and walk, scripture says, “*in newness of life.*”<sup>7</sup> Lives are amended, healed, and transformed and our saints and loved ones come among us in ways even better sometimes than when they physically were here.

We do not, for instance, only remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision quest for civil rights for all. (Because of the reports about some of Dr. King’s alleged personal peccadilloes, now is a good time to say there are no perfect saints, including you and me, but only redeemed saints.) Martin comes among us in his resurrection life as one of the saints of God urging us in our day not to allow the rising tide of racism to win the day. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who asked for today’s hymn to be sung at his memorial service, does not live on only in our memory but as a part of the cloud of witnesses and communion of saints who inspires us to summon courage in bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

Our loved ones who have helped us along the way are not with us in memory alone. Our saints are not lost to us. They are in communion with us. They pray for us. It is not too much to say that we are in ministry together.

You know what the communion of saints is all about? You know what All Saints Sunday is all about? It is about God’s last word. It is never “death,” but “life,” in Jesus Christ our Lord. The wonderful words of our hymn say it best:

*O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle; they in glory shine; yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!*<sup>8</sup>

Welcome, all saints! Saints below, saints above, we all are one in Jesus Christ our Lord, to the glory of God!

Let us pray:

*“Be Thou, O God, for us in life our daily bread, Our heart’s true home when all our years have sped.”*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:4

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “For All the Saints,” third stanza #326 in Glory to God hymnal...hymn text by William Walsham How.

<sup>9</sup> The last words of the hymn “God of Our Life,” text by Hugh Thomson Kerr, the hymn sung in our worship today following the sermon.

Amen.