

SERMON
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee
The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)
November 1, 2015

All Saints’ Day, Year B
Revised Common Lectionary
Revelation 21:1-6A

“What do you want to be?”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin this morning with a question: What do you want to be when you grow up?

None of us are hearing this question for the first time. Most of us encountered it in our childhood, and many of us have asked it of others in their formative years: What do you want to be when you grow up? Most of us answer predictably: I want to be a doctor, or a soldier, or perhaps even a priest. Or, more creatively: I want to be a king or queen, or a shepherdess out on the green.¹

We know that children cannot predict with certainty what they will be doing ten or twenty years hence, and if we’re honest with ourselves, we don’t want them to. Plans change; goals evolve; horizons expand. The dreams of childhood may bear no resemblance to the dreams of maturity. Thus is the joy of living, and yet we continue to ask our question.

To explore this question a bit more fully, consider the way you would answer it for someone else – for your best friend, your spouse, your child. What do you want *them* to be when they grow up? Most of us want our loved ones to be patient, and brave, and true. We want them to be fulfilled, and generous, and loved. In short, we want them to be happy.

When it comes to the people that we love the most, the people for whom we would readily give our lives, we answer our age-old question in a very different way than when it is asked of us. When our loved ones find true happiness, their occupations become insignificant. Love moves us from nouns to adjectives, from industry to contentment, from worldliness to holiness.

If our love for other people can be that transformative, just imagine God’s love for us. Just imagine, as the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, “what is the breadth and length and height and depth... [of] the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...”²

God’s love never wavers. God wants us to be happy, and he loves us enough to keep on trying. In the wilderness, God attempted to restore his people through Moses’ law, but we refused to heed. God gave the judges, the kings, and the prophets, but we refused to be governed. God sent his own and only Son, his holy Word made perfect man, and still to this day too many people refuse to be transformed. The saints are different in kind.

¹ These examples (and other themes throughout) are drawn from the hymn text “I sing a song of the saints of God” by Lesbia Scott (1929). *The Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 293.

² Ephesians 3:18-19 (NRSV)

The saints are they who heard God's voice, who were transformed by his love, and who lived their lives in a way that inspires others to do the same. Though their bodies may be silenced, their voices live.

The Revelation to St. John the Divine is the both the summary and the capstone to the great love ballad that is salvation history. The Revelation's first twenty chapters are characterized by sin, warfare, and violence. As things go from bad to worse, the Revelation's story mimics everything that has come before it in the Bible. We see sin as a descending spiral, consuming God's people more and more as time marches on.

But, everything changes when we get to Revelation 21. In this morning's reading from the penultimate chapter in the entire Bible, God intervenes personally. No longer satisfied to send representatives, God takes matters into his own hands and acts of his own accord. He abolishes the entire known order, and offers a second new creation – a New Jerusalem in which there is no mourning, nor crying, nor pain.

The Revelation tells us nothing about how we will occupy our time in the New Jerusalem – what we will do, or what we will be. All we know is that we will be happy there, loved and transformed like all the saints, filled with joy and wonder in all God's works.

Make no mistake: The New Jerusalem is not heaven. The New Jerusalem is not up above, but here below. The New Jerusalem is a vision of what God can and will do in this corporeal world when he comes to set things right. Most days, I wish that he would bring that New Jerusalem to us now, but nothing stops us from living like he already has. The saints did, and so can we.

This is my third All Saints' Day at Holy Communion, and I have been here just long enough to have known and loved most of the saints whose names we will read out this morning. They were transformed by God's love, and they loved the world in reply: Doctors who shared their gifts with the poor. Charter members who stepped out in faith. Southern ladies who defined hospitality. Musicians who glorified God. Soldiers who quite literally saved the world. Spouses whose faithfulness to each other was absolute.

By rejecting the selfish ways of the world, our saints chose the harder life of faith. They participated in the restorative work that has been underway since Eden, and they planted the seeds of faithfulness for every subsequent generation to nurture. The saints of old testify to us from their generations that God loves the world too much to let it go. We testify to the same in ours.

What do I want to be when I grow up? A saint. A citizen of the New Jerusalem. A faithful person so transformed by the love of God that he cannot help but share that love with others.

Amen.