

“The Communion of Tentmaker Saints”

Sirach 44.1-10, Revelation 7.9-17, Matthew 5.1-12

[Partly from Episcopal Lectionary, Partly from Revised Common Lectionary]

6.Nov.05.

All Saints' A

Today we celebrate “the communion of the saints,” by reading the texts for All Saints’, which was actually Tuesday last— in the midst of that succession of days, celebrated in our varying church cultures in varying ways—

- Most recently Wednesday, November 2nd, traditionally called All Souls’ Day, is marked out West— and anywhere there’s a large enough Mexican population— as *El Día de los Muertos*, The Day of the Dead, when families have picnics in the graveyards, when shrines to deceased family members are created in homes, when favorite foods of the recently departed are eaten— all to invite the dead into our intimate lives, to affirm and acknowledge the continuing presence of the beloved dead in our lives.
- And then of course there was Monday, October 31st, and we all know how that is celebrated in American culture— as Reformation Day, naturally! Yes, the date in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral! And now all across this land, children go out at dark, door to door, in costume as their favorite Reformation character—
 - Some in the monk’s robe of Luther, perhaps with an inkwell to throw at the devil, greeting neighbors at their door with those most famous words, “Here I stand!” or “Sin boldly!” or even “I am justified by my faith alone!”¹
 - Others as the indulgence-seller Tetzl, with his box to accept the gift of coins, singing his quaint little song, “When the coin in the box klinks, the soul from purgatory springs!” OK, it rhymes better in German.
 - Or as Henry VIII, or Anne Boleyn, or Thomas Cranmer— complete with droll references to beheadings and burning at the stake. The humorous possibilities are endless, as I’m sure you’ve all experienced this week!
- One theme that ties all these together is that it is a moment to remember, honor, and appreciate those separated from us in time and space, with whom we commune at this Table **whenever** we celebrate this Sacrament.

In the spirit of Sirach, then, we take a moment to reflect on “**our** ancestors in their generations,” and how their spirits are with us, as part of our sustenance in the community and Communion we share in this place and time.

¹During the conference, Episcopal tentmaker / spiritual director Brian Hastings had asked us to cite “the most famous saying of Luther,” which he expected to be “I am justified by my faith alone!” But several first shouted, “Here I stand!” And Presbyterian tentmaker Fred Bunning was heard above all, crying, “Sin boldly!”

- Some, indeed, we prize for their **valor**,
- Some, for their intelligent counsel,
- Some, for their prophetic voices, and
- Some, for enabling us to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.”

Sirach also reminds us that — while some have “left behind a name,” the **famous** ones I’ll mention in a bit— they represent countless others of whom “there is no memory.”

So I’d like us to consider some “tentmaker saints,” and welcome **them** to our feast as well—

- First, of course, there are the biblical tentmakers— from whom we take that name— Prisca, Aquila, and Paul. Now, we’re always going on about Paul, so let’s take for today that original tentmaker **couple**, Prisca and Aquila—
 - They are mentioned 6 times in the New Testament— always together— in Acts and in Paul’s letters.
 - **Aquila** is a Jew from Asia Minor, who is at first living in Rome, married to **Prisca**. Her ethnicity is not mentioned, which leads some scholars to think she’s probably a Roman.
 - They leave Rome when the Emperor Claudius expels the Jews, and they settle in Corinth. When Paul comes to Corinth, Prisca and Aquila are already leaders of the church there.
 - And of course, Paul falls in with them because they are all **tentmakers**.
 - Paul refers to “the church in **their** house,” and Acts says Paul goes to **them**, stays and works with **them**, not just with “Aquila and his wife.” So Prisca and Aquila are always **both** pictured as fully equal co-workers with Paul, **both** as tentmakers and as evangelists and preachers, for several years— the original **tentmaker team!**²
 - They travel with Paul from Corinth to Ephesus, and stay there when Paul journeys on. And Paul tells us that at one point they “risked their necks for my life,” presumably in an episode of persecution.³
 - When a new preacher named Apollos comes to Ephesus, it’s Prisca and Aquila who give him helpful instruction about baptism. So you might say they are in theological education. And since Prisca is named first, some scholars think **she** was the lead teacher, more articulate and effective than Aquila. Some even think she may be the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. So **if** there’s any priority between them, it may be Prisca who is the seminary professor.⁴

²Acts 18.1-3, Romans 16.3.

³Acts 18.18-21, Romans 16.4.

⁴Acts 18.24-26; M.J. Sherover, “Aquila and Priscilla,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, I, 176.

- Another tentmaking couple, from the Reformation era, is Marie Denti re and Antoine Fromment, in Geneva in the 16th century.
 - They were leaders of the Reformation **before** Calvin came to town.
 - **Marie Denti re**, one of the “women preachers” of the early Protestant movement in Geneva, was the more famous of the two. Her 1536 book on the Reformation in Geneva is said to be “the oldest literary production coming out of Geneva from a Protestant pen.”
 - Then three years later she wrote “A Defense of Women,” on the appropriateness of women exercising leadership in the church.⁵ The Presbyterian Church in the USA finally agreed to ordain women ministers in the 1950's, more than 400 years later.
 - Marie was married to **Antoine Fromment**, whom we might know best as “the husband of Marie Denti re,” except that Calvin on his deathbed, recalling his early days in Geneva and those who initiated the Reformation there, spoke warmly of “that fine preacher Fromment,” who would take off his shopkeeper’s apron when he stepped to the pulpit, then afterwards “went back to his shop” and carried on preaching there too, “and thus gave a double sermon”!⁶
 - Fromment continued to be active in business ventures throughout his career, for which he took some flak, but Calvin always defended him.⁷
- **Francis Makemie** was ordained and commissioned by an Irish Presbytery to preach and plant Presbyterian churches in the American colonies.
 - So naturally, when he landed in North Carolina in the 1680's, the first thing he did was, **he started a business!** When he reckoned the time was right, he sold the business & went preaching, founding churches throughout the Carolinas, into New York, and especially in Maryland. All the while he developed new businesses and pursued both medicine and law. They didn’t have steroids at the time, but I still am inclined to think of him as a **tentmaker on steroids!**
 - In 1706 Makemie is credited with leading in the organizing of the first Presbytery in America, including churches in Maryland, Delaware, Philadelphia, and later New Jersey and Long Island. For this he is usually called “the father of American Presbyterianism.”⁸
 - But it is what happened the next year, 1707, that should especially endear Makemie to tentmakers. Lord Cornbury, Governor of New York, had him jailed for preaching without a license. I think Cornbury just couldn’t **imagine** this was a “real minister”! As

⁵Jane Dempsey Douglass, *Women, Freedom, and Calvin* (Westminster, 1985), pp.102-104.

⁶*John Calvin: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Anchor, 1971), “Calvin’s Will and Addresses to the Magistrates and Ministers—1564,” p.41.

⁷Jane Dempsey Douglass, private conversation.

⁸Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (4th ed.; Westminster, 1983), pp.60-62; James H. Smylie, *American Presbyterians: A Pictorial History*, in *Journal of Presbyterian History*, LXII, Spring/Summer 1985, p.16.

the Governor put it in his accusation, Makemie was a “Jack of all Trades, a Preacher, a Doctor of Physik, a Merchant, an Attorney ... and which is worst of all, a **Disturber of Governments**”! Makemie argued in court that he **did** have a license to preach, and that he had to obey the call of God before he could obey the Governor. He won his case, and the Governor had to pay the court costs **and** compensate Makemie for the time spent in jail!⁹

- More recently, **Roland Allen** has been recognized as a prophetic voice to the church, both on tentmaking ministry and on missions.
- Allen was an Anglican missionary to China from 1895 to 1902, then parish priest in England until 1907. He resigned because he could not in good conscience baptize infants “on demand,” without any evidence of the parents’ Christian commitment.

⁹Smylie, *op.cit.*, p.17; Loetscher, *op.cit.*, p.62.

- From then on he earned his living by writing and other means for the 40 years until his death in 1947.¹⁰
- In the 1998 book *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-Supporting Ministry*, Allen's name is all over the place— not only in his own piece on “The Maintenance of Ministry in the Early Ages of the Church,” and in another article on Allen's career, but in references to him in several other articles.
- His final work on tentmaking is *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*, 1930, which revises and combines two earlier books on the same topic.
- It is reported that Roland Allen “once predicted that his work would not be taken seriously until about 1960!” Prophetic indeed!¹¹

John, the seer of the great vision in the Book of Revelation, sees the great multitude of “all tribes and peoples and languages,” worshiping God, and the Lamb on the throne.

- And an elder— a *presbuteros*— which you can interpret according to your own theology this morning!¹²— the presbyter asks John the trick question, **who** they are and **where** they are from.
- John doesn't know, so the elder says, Well, let me tell you! They've come through “the great ordeal,” but now they have been made whole forever by the Lamb, and they are forever sheltered and nurtured by God, “shepherded” by the Lamb, even the **traces** of sorrow “wiped away” by God.

And then Jesus, in our Gospel reading, at the end of the Beatitudes, gives the final blessing directly to **us**—

¹⁰Charles H. Long and Anne Rowthorn, “The Legacy of Roland Allen,” in *Tentmaking: Perspectives on Self-Supporting Ministry*, ed. James M.M. Francis and Leslie J. Francis (Gracewing, 1998), pp.355-357.

¹¹In *ibid.*— Roland Allen, “The Maintenance of the Ministry in the Early Ages of the Church,” pp.54-60; *The Case for Voluntary Clergy* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1930), cited by Frank R. Barry, “Who Are Fit Persons?” p.78; Long and Rowthorn, p.357; *passim*.

¹²A part of the experience of the conference was the efforts of Presbyterians and Episcopalians to explain to one another their use of such terms as “elder” and “presbyter.”

- In the original text, the earlier blessings say, “Blessed are **they . . .**”
- But now it is “Blessed are **you**”!
- *The Message* version reads, “Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.” [Mt 5.11-12]

We don't all experience the sufferings of martyrs. But this final blessing doesn't refer to torture and death, but to **less** severe, mainly verbal and spiritual kinds of opposition.

- We as tentmakers have experienced opposition of this kind **within the church**— not what Jesus had in mind, I don't think!
- But still we should “rejoice and be glad” this day, Jesus tells us. The prophetic advocates of tentmaking— and those who make the prophetic statement of simply **being in the role** of tentmakers¹³— like those who advocate mission, or social justice, or evangelism— all are gathered with us here at this Table.
- We bring our struggles “in the marketplace, in the home, in the courts,” with the government— and, yes, with the church!— to the good company of the multitude gathered here.
- We will say in our Communion service, “Lift up your hearts,” and we will by the Spirit **be lifted up** into the presence of “God and the Lamb,” with all who have come through the struggle, especially the struggle for the renewal of ministry and faith. Come to the Table, all ye saints! Amen.

Hymn: *Presbyterian Hymnal* #364 “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God,” changing the first line to “I sing a song of the tentmaker saints”

¹³Anglican “Minister in Secular Employment” (MSE), Margaret Joachim, had made the claim during the conference that merely **being in the role** of tentmaker was itself a prophetic act.