

“A Great Multitude”

Psalm 34:1-10, 22 & Revelation 7:9-17

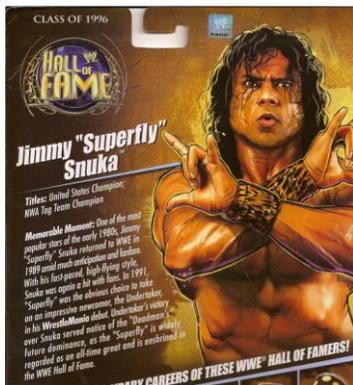
Rev. James Ramsey ~ October 26, 2014 ~ ALL SAINTS' Sunday

I have this vivid memory from my high school days – not only does it make me smile, but it illustrates the advantage of having friends in high places.

Somehow, one of my buddies acquired tickets to one of those World Wrestling Federation bout nights. All the famous wrestlers were going to be there – the names were different back in the 80s, when I was in high school --- the stars were Hulk Hogan, Kamala “the Ugandan Giant”, and Jimmy “Super Fly Snooka.”



Not only did we have tickets to this popular event, but my buddy got a tip that all the wrestlers were eating at a local Denny's before the show. It sounded far-fetched, but we decided to visit the Denny's and see what we could see. We arrived at the Denny's 3 hours before the event and quickly realized we were not the only ones who had the tip. The parking lot was jammed and we had to park two blocks away.



We crammed into the restaurant and my friend is spotting all the wrestling greats. His tip was confirmed. It was hard to move in the restaurant because of the great multitude of wrestling fans clamoring for autographs. My buddy, Tod, wriggled his way between people and the next thing you know we see him across the room, whispering in the ear of this giant of a man – who we quickly realized was Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka. (Superfly got his nickname because his signature move was standing on the top rope in the corner of the ring and flying through the air to land on top of his opponent. Once he did that the match was usually over!)

Tod yells to us, “Hey guys, c'mon over and get a picture with Superfly!” and then continues talking with the superstar. We tried to break through the crowd, but nobody was moving for us, assuming we were cutting in line. Just then, this booming voice echoes through the room, “Move out of the way – I want to get a picture with my friends!”

Superfly Snuka had a reputation of being a crazy man. He had this gaze that froze opponents. When his booming voice filled the restaurant we saw that gaze and the multitude parted! We were able to walk unmolested to Superfly's side, the crowd giving us plenty of room. He put his massive arms around us and we got a great and memorable picture. We went on to see the wrestling match later that evening, but after that scene and the picture, everything else was anticlimactic. We had our picture taken with Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka – and he called us friends!

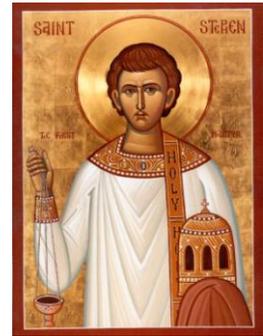


All joking aside, it's good to have friends. The biblical vision of the Great Multitude reminds us that we do have friends. We are not alone. Good, faithful people have gone before us and prepared the way.



John, in his Revelation, imagines a great rooting section – if you try to make a picture of it, you struggle to do it justice – a great multitude praising God and God's ways -- and we know God's ways involve us – so that rooting section is also for us, pulling for us, cheering us on. These faithful saints have our back. The church has always been encouraged by their witness.

In early Christian tradition, saints' days began as a way to remember faith of particular saints, often martyrs who kept the faith at great risk. By the middle of the church's first millennium, there were so many saints to remember that it became impossible to give them all their due. And so All Saints' Day was established. The Reformed tradition, while giving thanks for the lives of particular luminaries of the past, emphasized the ongoing sanctification of all God's people.



All Saints' Day became a time to give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of believers in this and every age. We now rejoice in all who have faithfully served the Lord through the ages. We are reminded us that we are part of one continuing, living communion of saints. Today we express our gratitude for all who in ages of darkness kept the faith, for those who have taken the gospel to the ends of the earth, for prophetic voices who have called the

church to be faithful in life and service, for all who have witnessed to God's justice and peace in every nation.

Today, let our awareness be expanded – let us take stock of a great multitude – great company of witnesses above and around us like a cloud – as the writer of Hebrews put it.

You can also think of it as the great Tree of Life. Each leaf representing a faithful saint of the past. Such an awareness can lift us out of a preoccupation with our own immediate situation and the discouragements of the present...for we know that others have persevered. Reminded that God was with the faithful of the past, we are reassured that God is with us today, moving us and all creation toward God's end in time.



We read from Revelation, which makes everybody a little nervous! There has been so much speculation about this cryptic book, because no one completely understands it. Much mischief has come from assuming one knows what the book means, from applying it word for word to particular historical or future situations...

...Better that we marvel at the poetry and the pageantry of John's vision. He was a prophet of hope, sent to God's desperate persecuted people. Although he had been



exiled to the lonely island of Patmos, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, John preached words of triumph. He challenged his people's despair with inspiring and insistent words. His Revelation may be described as a poetic picture book, which, by an accumulation of magnificent images and symbols, makes a powerful appeal to the imagination.

Through his incredible story, God's message is delivered:

"I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count...from all tribes and peoples...standing before the throne and before the Lamb...and they cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God..."

And there were angels...the elders...the four living creatures... and they 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."



It's going to turn out all right – that's the message of the seer's vision of the heavenly throne room! God is in control and there is a great multitude around him -- described as being of a size "no one could count," an expression found nowhere else in the Bible, although such imagery echoes descriptions early in scripture of a people too numerous to number – descriptions in Genesis and Numbers. This is the great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

A great multitude...God surely appreciates the heavenly worship, but always on God's mind is another great multitude – not the one in heaven, but the living one on earth. God looks forward to the day when this great multitude "will hunger no more, and thirst no more." God anticipates that future time when "the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat." The Lamb 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.



Even as we lift up and celebrate the great multitude of the Heavenly Host, at the same time our hearts are with people here, who crave the Good News of the Gospel, who are desperate for justice and peace, who yearn for enough to eat, clean water to drink and a secure roof over the heads of their children and families.

The World Council of Churches addressed this great multitude in a now obscure ecumenical document from the 1950s. Here's what it said:

Multitudes ask themselves, 'What is coming to the world? What is in front of us? What may we look forward to?' The answer to those questions has been given to us in the Gospel. To those who ask, 'What is coming to the world?' we answer 'His Kingdom is coming.' To those who ask, 'What is in front of us?' we answer, 'It is He, the King, who confronts us.' To those who ask, 'What may we look forward to?' we answer that we face not a trackless waste of unfilled time with an end that none can dare to predict; we face our living Lord, our Judge and Savior, He who was dead and is alive forevermore, He who has come and is coming and will reign forever and ever. It may be that we face tribulation; indeed we must certainly face it if we would be partakers with Him. But we know His word, His kingly word: 'Be comforted, I have overcome the world.'



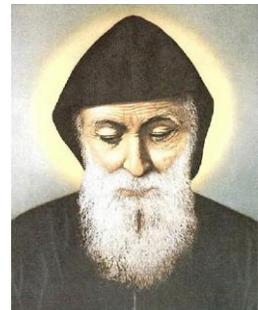
Picture yourself on Fifth Avenue in New York City. It is the height of rush hour and the swarm of bodies pushes past you like a solid mass of humanity wearing a thousand different faces. Some are expressionless. Most seem to project feelings of frustration, fatigue and above all, anxiety. It's almost impossible for you to stand still amidst the motion of the masses. You feel they could easily sweep you away but you hold your ground. If you could rise above the crowd and look in any direction you'd see what appears to be an endless river of people.



What are you feeling right now? Overwhelmed? Perhaps threatened? Anxious to get away from the crowd? If you're not accustomed to the big city, the throngs of people can be downright intimidating. Nevertheless, ask yourself the question: How would Jesus feel?

The Scriptures tell us, "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd."

What is a saint? Think not only of a holy man with a halo, but also as Someone who is moved with compassion like Jesus... someone who shares their gifts that others might benefit...someone who shepherds others, someone who speaks and lives and models



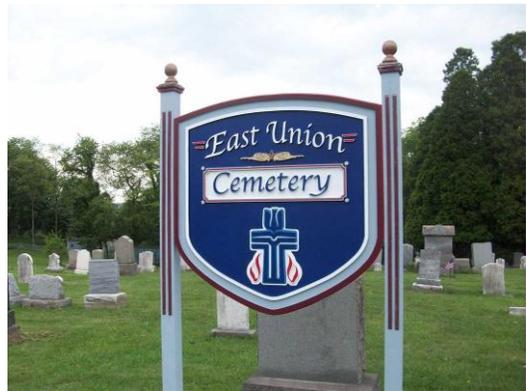
hope, someone devoted to the way of love, someone who demonstrates the way of Christ, someone who helps you understand the Gospel in a new way, someone who fulfills God's will in a quiet, unassuming way.

Who is a saint to you, personally? Who has inspired you in the faith, shown you the way, lifted you when you were down, helped you in a holy and healing way? For whom do you give thanks?

Today is about leaving the tree – remembering that we are not alone – that we have been helped by ancestors in the faith who paved the way for us.

East Union Church is part of the tree of life – her members past make that tree broad and colorful.

There are so many who have made significant contributions to the growth of our church. **Dr. Richard Kennedy** pastored East Union from 1956 to 1993. He oversaw many positive changes at East Union and in the lives of countless individuals; **Jean Brooke** was ordained our first female elder; **Thomas Magill** was a founding member and offered to hand-dig the trench for the foundation of our first church building; **Mary Boggs Bell** wrote an historic letter applauding freedom of religion in America in 1816, 34 years later her grandson, Robert Herron, was one of East Union's Founding Fathers; **Raymond Geiser** left East Union a \$1 Million Bequest which allowed us to build the EUCC and has been used to support mission outreach and activities ever since; **Agnes & Elizabeth McClelland**, sisters, sold the original land for the church for the mere sum of \$20; **Rev. James Given** was East Union's first regular pastor, serving from 1854-1857; **L. Allen Reynolds, M.D.**, gave a memorial gift of 100 shares of American Telephone & Telegraph stock designated for East Union's musical programs, a fund which is still used today; **The Toepfer Family** left East Union a bequest of over \$1 Million - that gift was given in perpetuity, so that the principal will always provide the church with income. The fund is up to about 1.4 million dollars. This year the church will receive over \$64,000 from the Toepfer Fund.



As I told the children, I will put a leaf on the tree for Mary Lu Zehnder, Jo's mother, who loved me like her own son, welcomed me into her family and taught me much about hospitality and faith.

I will also hang a leaf for Rev. Clint McCoy, my friend and colleague, who was the long-time Executive Presbyter of Northern New York Presbytery, where I first served in ministry. Clint was a gentle, wise man, with whom I fished and prayed and laughed and served.

I invite you to hang a leaf or two – giving thanks to God for the great multitude...

