

“Always Room For One More”

Revelation 7:9-17

A Sermon from the First Pew of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
November 1st, 2020/All Saints' Day
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In the Scottish folk tale Always Room for One More, Lachie MacLachlan and his wife have built a house of love. Even though their house is small and they have 10 children, there's always room for one more. When folk travel through and need a place to stay, they can count on Lachie. When the bagpiper and the peat moss cutter and the tinker and tailor and sailor all descend at once, Lachie makes room. His wee little house in the heather has almost as much room as his gracious heart. At Lachie's house, there's always room for one more.

Our text this morning from Revelation brings this story to mind.

First, when we dive into the book of Revelation we need to say from the start, the book of Revelation scares a lot of people. The language is coded, artistic, far reaching. The plot is apocalyptic in that it talks about the end of time, which terrifies many of us. The story is the ultimate tale of Good versus Evil. God is good. The Roman government is bad. It's Right versus Wrong, it's Winner versus Loser. And God's right always wins. The book of Revelation, then, is exactly now what it was intended when it was written: The book of Revelation is a book of great comfort couched in the scariest plot and most terrifying language imaginable. But remember: this story is meant to comfort Christians.

Our text at the middle of chapter seven begins with the words “after this”—and one might ask, “After what?” The previous verses spell out that 144,000 Jewish Christians who are to be marked with a seal on their foreheads. God will protect them. 12,000 will come from each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Thus, our passage begins with “after this.” After plans have been reported, after details have been spelled out, after the mind of God has been reduced to neat numbers and all the people have been counted—after this, a GREAT multitude appears. This great, uncountable multitude includes people from all around the world, every nation, all tribes, all languages—and they are from not just the 12 tribes of Israel. In God' house, it would appear, there's always room for one more.

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Flannery O'Connor is also known for exploring apocalyptic scenes. In her story “Revelation,” set in the Jim-Crow South in the late 1950's or early sixties, we are introduced to Ruby, a woman who feels superior to all people in town. She thinks she's better than anybody. So, Ruby, who has a small mind, thinks she's better than just about everybody in the big world: she's better than Black people, she's better than white trash.

One day when she's out taking care of the pigs in her back yard, she has a vision. She looks up and sees a highway winding into the setting sun. And on that highway are the redeemed of God, lined up, walking into heaven. At the very front of that line are all the people that Ruby dislikes, and Ruby feels judged. She feels judged by God. Yes, she and husband and the other “good church folk” are in the line, also, but where are they? They are at the back of the line. Those whom Ruby hated and judged and considered inferior and unworthy are at the front of the line, and they are glad and elated. But Ruby is mad at the upside-down justice of God.

In O'Connor's view of heaven, there's always room for one more. But those who believe they've earned a special place might be surprised their special place is dead last.

It is possible that some of the early-century Jewish Christians might be chagrined to learn that Gentiles are included in the New Heaven and New Earth. People from every corner of the earth are included among the throng of God's beloved. Insiders are often upset that outsiders are sometimes welcomed. And followers of Jesus are often perplexed if not maddened by the upside-down justice of God.

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We are on the verge of another important election. Some have suggested that battle lines have been drawn. In Revelation, John of Patmos makes perfectly clear: it won't be the powers to the left or the powers to the right who will win. It is the sovereign, all-powerful God who will win. The God of justice, and mercy, and love always wins—in this life, and in the next.

In fact, we are ultimately neither right nor left. Most correctly, we are brothers and sisters. The writer of one of John's letters would say, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." So, take heart, and be comforted.

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It's easy to use our theological imagination to picture people like smug Ruby at God's throne—maybe at the back of the crowd. She who has made others to suffer is there, by God's grace. By God's grace, the likes of Lachie MacLachlin are there. It's easy to imagine all those whom we have entrusted to God's care are gathered there now. All of them cleaned by the love of Jesus, washed by the blood of the Lamb. No hunger, no thirst, no pain, no more.

And God? God the great shepherd will wipe away all tears.

AMEN.

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