

“The Bread We Break, the Great Ordeal We Share”

November 5, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
All Saints Sunday, the Thirty-first in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Text: *“Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.”*

(Revelation 7:14b-15, NRSV)



Image Credit: *“The Sacrament of the Last Supper,”* by Salvador Dali, 1955. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. -- <https://www.dalipaintings.com/the-sacrament-of-the-last-supper.jsp>

What we have here is Salvador Dali's painted version of the Last Supper. You remember Leonardo da Vinci's version: They are all sitting at a table -- an anachronistic vision, mind you, because no one would be sitting like that, at a table like that, in Jesus' day. In many parts of the Middle East, even today, people sat closer to the floor -- rather like Jesus and the disciples depicted in Dali's version.

One of the reasons I selected this painting to grace the cover of the bulletin is because the disciples are robed in white which reminds me of the white-robed saints we have read about in John's Revelation this morning.

A striking aspect of this painting is the gesturing that Jesus is doing as he sits with the disciples. He places his left hand on his chest while also pointing above him with the index finger of his raised right hand. And what is above him? It is a torso. This seems unusual.

In an earlier part of his painting career Dali was known as a surrealist; a surrealist was one who took ordinary objects and placed them into unusual contexts in a dreamlike vision. You may remember the painting of dripping clocks in a work he entitled, *"The Persistence of Memory,"* (1931). But this painting comes later in his career after Dali had returned to his Catholic roots. Dali often painted into his work a background acknowledgement of the place of his birth along the Catalan coastal area of northeastern Spain. According to the National Gallery of Art, what you see in this painting is actually "the craggy bay of Port Lligat as a backdrop."ⁱ The shoreline we see out beyond the room where the disciples are gathered is one that corresponds to the actual coast of his childhood.

The torso we see is Dali's image of the Father -- God in heaven -- with his arms stretched wide to embrace the whole world. Remember what Jesus once said: *"No one has seen the Father"* -- even Moses didn't get to do that -- *"No one has seen the Father"* (John 6:46) . . . And he also said, *"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father."*ⁱⁱ (John 14:9) These remembrances bring the elements and figures of this painting right into focus . . . It is profoundly and theologically accurate.

Let us return to the white-robed disciples: Notice that their focus is a bowed reverence into the table where the bread is broken and the wine is poured out; where we meet the real, spiritual presence of our Lord at his Holy Supper.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

I also like Dali's painting of the Last Supper because in it he makes the walls of the room mostly transparent -- permeable -- as if you can pass right through. This was what Jesus was able to do after the resurrection; pass through the walls even though the doors were locked! (See John 20:19)

The Celts have a phrase for this; they call such spaces and places "Thin places". It is where heaven and earth seem to be right next to each other; separated by the thinnest of veils. That is especially comforting for anybody who grieves. The thin places -- the space between heaven and earth are not far away from each other. So Dali's painting is one which depicts a thin place -- his own home, his own upbringing; his own childhood, yet here is the risen Christ embodying the embrace of the Father over all the world -- where he is.

The passage from Revelation talks about this vast multitude -- and so diverse! If any of you have any ideas about diversity and inclusion in heaven? Yes, heaven is like that; diverse and very inclusive! There are so many in this vast multitude that John is having a hard time describing it all except that they are all robed in white -- Understand: from being dipped in the blood of the Lamb and washed clean! Think about that. Dipped in blood and washed whiter than snow. The expression, of course, is one of purity, that's all; the idea of being pure because they have stepped into and washed themselves in the blood of the Lamb; the Lamb who becomes their shepherd.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1)

John asked who these people are who are robed in white, turns to the Elder who asked him the question, *"I don't know, but you obviously do. You tell me." "These are all those who have come out of the great ordeal" . . . who are now before the throne of God in the presence of the Lamb.*

When we think of saints we so often think of all those perfect people; a lot of them named by our Roman Catholic friends, St. Anthony, Saint Joseph, and now Saint Theresa -- all those folks to whom we say, *"Wow! That's pretty heady company, pretty extraordinary people! . . . No, saints are people like you and me who try to live out our faith day-by-day; some days are better than others for us; some days*

we feel closer to those others because of the thin places between heaven and earth -- so close we could almost touch them. Other days it feels nothing like that; in fact, sometimes it feels like everything is pressing in, squeezing us. And we long for that freedom; that vision; that place beyond the squeeze. . . . Whether what squeezes us is our own fear, or sadness, the weight of our own failures, or the hurtful bruising and punishment of others in our spirits, in our bodies, squeezing us in . . . Ever have a day like that?

"Thlipseos" -- it is a really hard word to pronounce -- *thlipseos*. It is the Greek word in this passage from Revelation translated "*the Great Ordeal*". It means "*squeezing*", "*pressing*", like grapes being crushed; like apples that are pressed into cider. Another way to think of it is to think of a "*bottleneck*", a "*constriction*"; those who are oppressed and persecuted, who are feeling the push of the pressure in on them . . .

"Who are these who have washed their robes?"

"Sir, you know."

"These are those who have gone through the great ordeal" . . . the great ordeal. . . Who stand before the presence of God, waving palm branches and praising Him . . . Saints in heaven.

Saints are people like you and me, who go through life's ordeals -- some of those ordeals are horrible, truly horrible, and people endure; they make it through; they are bruised and scarred and yet they're loved and cared for, even in the midst, given an opportunity to wash their robes clean.

When we break bread at this table, the bread itself has been mashed down, ground down by the stone to release the life-giving grain, processed to make the bread; the wine made by the pressing of the grapes -- "*thlipseos*". Can we believe that when we break bread, right here, that we are breaking bread with the Lord Jesus Christ, right here? And as we do, we are breaking bread with all those that we know and love who have gone before us; who are part of that huge, huge throng who have passed through the great ordeal. We can sense them in the thin places especially, gathered with us. On "All Saints

Sunday", especially, we sense the "Communion of Saints" -- you and me and them, with Him; "For in as much as you have seen me," he says, "you have seen the Father", the Father who loves us all.

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

ⁱ From a description offered by the curators of the National Gallery of Art for Salvador Dali's *"The Sacrament of the Last Supper"*, 1955. Found on-line at <https://www.nga.gov/Collection/art-object-page.46590.html>.

ⁱⁱ A very fine reflection on this artwork is made by Michael Anthony Novak. *"Misunderstood Masterpiece: Salvador Dali's 'The Sacrament of the Last Supper,'"* November 5, 2012, in *America: the Jesuit Review*; found on-line at <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/misunderstood-masterpiece>.