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***Revelation 7: 9-17***

*Communion of Saints*

It's a quiet October morning here at the church office when suddenly and as if from afar a wild call erupts, piercing the sky. I look up to hawk-shadows dancing on leaves of grass. In the next moment a red and brown and white speckled blur streaks across the window and stops on the ground, settling just in front of my car, whereupon a juvenile Red-Tailed Hawk emerges into focus.

The few of us who were there that morning gathered together in quiet awe. At first we weren't sure what kind of hawk this was, so we sent a few quick camera phone pictures to some better birder friends to get confirmation that it was in fact a Red-Tail, but we did sense almost immediately that it must be the juvenile version of whatever species it was because of the way it didn't seem to know what to do with the prey it had just caught—at one moment grasping it in its talons as if it were going to fly off, at another moment letting it go, watching it curiously, and then pouncing on it again and playing with it almost like a cat would do. In the end, the young hawk eventually let the prey go for good, and retreated to his or her perch, first on the swing-set in the church parking lot, next to a tree behind the church office.

*“Consider the birds of the air,”* as Jesus said, and so I've found myself considering this encounter with the juvenile hawk, and thinking about how the young hawk must share something of our sense of this church as a sacred place—as a place where maybe like juveniles ourselves we can learn to navigate the questions and issues of life and death; a place also where we, like the hawk perched above, can encounter an expansive perspective on the created world; and where, perhaps also like the young hawk, we can discover something about our role and place within it.

While the main work in making this church into the type of sacred place that we yearn for it to be is up to each of us, to bring our various gifts and talents and resources to bolster the life and mission of this congregation, we're often helped out by certain structures of the church at large, as with the very basic

outline of our curriculum that we have through the sacred calendar of the church year.

In the calendar of the church today is traditionally celebrated as a very special day—as All Saints Day, the day when we remember and celebrate all those who have come before us in this life of faith, a day where we sense how, even today, we remain surrounded and upheld by such a great cloud of witnesses, to use the great image that the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews uses.

Or, to use the beautiful image that our text from Revelation uses, today we remember *that great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and worshiping God, singing out blessings and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might to God forever and ever...*

The great multitude. The cloud of witnesses. When it comes to those who have gone before us, we owe them so much, don't we? In relation those who have died we the living stand in something like the position of being in an infinite, irrepayable debt to them.

One of the highlights for me in moving to this new place and of starting with you here at this new church this fall has been spending some time looking over this church's history. I want to thank Ida Washington, particularly, for her careful preparation and writing of these precious resources and for her willingness to share them with me.

As we think about those who have come before us on this All Saints Day, here's some of what I've enjoyed learning about those who came before us here at the Weybridge Church...

It was on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1790 it seems when this whole adventure of the Weybridge Church began, when at a town meeting the following actions were taken: *"Voted to do something to promote preaching. Voted to choose a standing committee for the above purpose. Voted to raise a sum of 20 pounds for support of the Gospel to be paid in Grain and Provisions."*

The first preacher was named John Gilbert, and he was called as the preacher “*provided he will preach for six shillings or less per Sabbath and otherwise,*” and the first services were held in a log cabin in the woods, just south of here on Weybridge Hill.

A few short years later, in 1794 the formal church was organized by fifteen founding members—seven men and eight women, and these included: farmers, doctors, millers, lawyers, tax collectors, politicians, Revolutionary War veterans, and also a young explorer and linguist.

Thinking about that first group of 15, I think we today do a pretty good job of carrying on that legacy of having a congregation of diverse talents and callings while also striving for equality on all fronts.

One of the interesting differences between now and then though was that, whereas now we the members and friends of this church bear sole responsibility for supplying the church with its annual budget, when the church first started here in Weybridge the church received its funding primarily from property taxes.

To administer the organizational aspect of this early church-town alliance, a group called “The First Ecclesiastical Society” was formed, and they formed around a beautifully written Constitution, and if you don’t mind I’d like to read a bit of it today, both as a way of remembering where we come from, as well as to recall the duty that we’ve been entrusted with to carry on the mission and life of this church.

As a warning, the language is very much of its time and so it’s replete with antiquated gender and cultural norms, but there’s also I think a certain abiding elegance and beauty to it...

The Constitution begins, “*As order is the first law of Heaven, and from the constitution of things it became necessary from the earliest ages of the World for mankind to unite together in societies in order to secure individuals the enjoyment of their liberties & property and as the improvement of our minds is of no less importance than the security of our property...[.]...it of consequence follows, that it is our duty to make use of those means which the benevolent author of our existence has placed in our*

*power for enlightening our understanding and of making us wise unto salvation...[]...And as we esteem it of the highest consequence not only to ourselves and to the rising generation; but to generations yet unborn, that the inhabitants of this Town, divesting themselves of prejudice and selfish motives should unite together in brotherly love, in such a manner that there might be a probability of obtaining the regular & stated preaching of the gospel of the blessed Jesus. – We the undersigned do therefore unite together... and it is the earnest desire of our hearts that the God of order, the giver of Wisdom, in whom are all our ways may direct us to adopt such measures as may best subserve the cause of religion and our own eternal interest and that of unborn generations...”*

It's a beautiful Constitution certainly, and it can be a humbling thing to think of ourselves as the heirs of such a well-articulated vision and dream for what our life together might be.

To add a bit of levity and human face this grand history, though, I also liked reading of how the first pastor's salary was set to be \$225 and of how it was set to be paid, not in bills or in coins or with a check, but paid either in cattle on the first of October, or paid in grain the first of January.

You know, when I read that I had a twinge of regret that I didn't request something like that in my call agreement, you know, maybe a few chickens each summer, a few goats each fall, a cow in the winter, some sheep in the spring...something like that...

There's another funny story told about how with this first pastor who received his pay in cows and grain, it so happened that early one morning some men in the neighborhood went out into his field and cut all the pastor's hay before the pastor had woken up. When the pastor expressed worry to the deacons that the hay might spoil before he could get it properly cared for, the deacons advised him to say nothing about the matter, but to get a large supply of rum ready at the parsonage. The pastor agreed to this, whereupon the men of the neighborhood promptly returned eager to prepare his hay for him and to drink his rum.

You know, in reading these and other stories about our early history, I felt wave of gratitude upon wave of gratitude wash over me. We are indeed the heirs of a long and proud history.

The medieval theologians of Europe had a phrase that they would use to refer to how in their own thinking they were thoroughly dependent on the great thinkers of antiquity like Plato and Aristotle, and so the medieval thinkers would refer to themselves as *"dwarfs standing on shoulders of giants."*

When I think today about the founding of this church, and about those beautiful words of the Constitution, I feel something similar, like a dwarf standing on the shoulders of a giant.

In addition to people like Plato and Aristotle, one great giant for me in my own intellectual development has been the Danish philosopher and Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard.

There's one of Kierkegaard's works in particular that I've read for the first time this fall and which has helped me to understand another way of commemorating All Saints Day, and so I want to end today by sharing with you Kierkegaard's take on it.

The book that I'm referring to is called *Works of Love*, and in it Kierkegaard reflects on what in many ways is the ultimate ideal and practice of our faith—that we grow in love—that we grow in love for one another and that we grow in love for God.

Love, in the properly Christian sense, is something much more than an emotion that we may or may not feel towards another—love is more like a commandment, like a duty, like a responsibility—*"I give you this new commandment,"* as Jesus says, *"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, may you also love one another."*

Love as a commandment and as a duty can be the most difficult thing in the world—it means that we practice the type of love that is absolutely unconditional, that seeks not its own reward, but rather seeks first the benefit of the other; the type of love that, as Paul writes, is always *"patient and*

*kind...the type of love that bears all things, that believes all things, that hopes all things, that endures all things."*

So this is our ideal, our goal, to love in this way, and yet we all know how muddled our everyday attempts to love can be. Given that we're always reacting to one another, always in relationship with one another, and so always involved in the give and take, in the back and forth and in the messy rapport of human relationship, it can be hard to tell whether our love ever attains to the type of disinterested and unconditional love that's called for here.

Here's where, I think, Kierkegaard presents a really interesting idea. He proposes, in the last chapter in his book, that if we want to test ourselves as to whether we're able to love disinterestedly and without condition, then we should pay attention and take note of how we love one who is dead.

He calls this spiritual practice *"the work of love in remembering one who is dead,"* and he argues that such love is the most unselfish of all love, for indeed when we love one who is dead, there is absolutely no possibility of repayment or requital—that, even more so than the type of tragic romantic love that isn't returned, loving the dead is the ultimate act of unrequited love.

Kierkegaard ends this chapter writing: *"The work of love in remembering one who is dead is a work of the most disinterested, the freest, and the most faithful love. Therefore go out and practice it; remember one dead and learn in just this way to love the living disinterestedly, freely, faithfully...Remember one who is dead, and in addition to the blessing which is inseparable from this work of love, you will also have the best guidance to rightly understand life: that it is one's duty to love those we do not see, and also those that we do see."*

And so to remember the dead. And so to love the dead. And so to love the living also. On this All Saints Day, may God help us to it. //Amen//