

## All Saints Day & the 50<sup>th</sup> year Remembrance of Integration of Central High School Little Rock, Arkansas

November 4, 2007 Holy Spirit, Gulfshores, Alabama  
Guest Preacher: The Rev. Joanna J. Seibert M.D., Deacon

"Let us now sing the praises of famous men.. and women... our ancestors in their generation." All Saints is our church's family reunion day. It is the day we pull out our family photograph album and remember where we came from.<sup>1</sup>

" I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count."

But when we look closer at the individual portfolios of the saints, we notice that they were not, well, "saints." They were ordinary people with the same doubts and fears as the rest of us.

In Little Rock last month we commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the integration of Central High School in 1957. Trinity Cathedral partnered with a nearby black church Bethel AME planning two services to remember what the church did and did not do during that crisis and joining together to make a new start. Our congregations learned much about each other and our past.

In 1957, the parents of the nine black students who tried to enter Central High could not accompany them, but their ministers could. A call went out to black and white ministers to walk with the students. Only two white ministers responded. One was a Presbyterian minister, Dunbar Ogden. His son has written a book about his father's experience called, *My Father Said Yes*. This is how Rev. Ogden describes that morning he first met the students:<sup>2</sup> *" I can't say the children looked afraid. The word I would use to describe them is thoughtful. They looked just like any eight boys and girls of high school age, fine clean-cut, youngsters. I had an impulse to throw my arms around them and I thought: they're so much like the young people in my church, so much like the young people in my home.*

One of the Negro men came over to me and said, 'Well, Reverend Ogden, are you going with us?' And I said, 'Well, I don't know.' And he said, 'Well, you know at 8:10 we're going to start walking.' And everyone was silent.

"And I thought something should be said, being a minister, I guess. I didn't actually offer a prayer but I said, 'Now, young people, you are doing something this morning that takes a lot of faith and courage. We don't know what that mob is going to try to do to you. But we know it is a very bad situation. I want you to remember your own Martin Luther King and what he said about non-violence. There was a man named Gandhi in India and he had the same idea and he helped to win the freedom of his people. Of course there was one whom we call Jesus Christ and it is written that when he was reviled, he reviled not again.'

And about this time, a Negro came over and said, 'it's 8:09 now. Are you going with us or not?'

I said, 'I don't know.'

And he said, 'Reverend Ogden, isn't it about time you make up your mind?'

And then, I can say more in retrospect, this had the effect of making me feel yes, I had to make up my mind whether I was going all the way.

And then I had a very strange feeling, that we describe as something of a prophetic experience. I had the strange feeling, as clear as day, and I felt this is right; this is what I should do.

"There was not the slightest doubt but that I should do it. I ought to do it. And I felt this was the will of God for me, every bit of fear just drained out.

'All right,' my father said. 'I will go with you.'"<sup>2</sup>

In that moment he makes a choice that will change his life, and the course of history. He turns and begins to walk down Park Street toward Central High. He does not look back. Shortly afterwards, Rev. Ogden is asked by his congregation to leave Little Rock.

"Their bodies are buried in peace, but their names live on generation after generation."

Let me tell you about two other men who were short on height but long on love of the Lord. One is dead and one is still alive.

The living saint is Bishop Desmond Tutu who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which heard grievances from those who suffered during the apartheid era. His daughter, Naomi, preached at Trinity commemorating the integration of Central High School. The commission gave voice to stories in the hope of burying past bitterness. This is an excerpt from one of his addresses. "People may commit demonic acts but they are not demons. It is very dangerous to demonize our opponents. Everyone has the potential of becoming a saint."

"Who are those robed in white and where have they come from?"

These passages from Revelation are very important to Archbishop Tutu.<sup>3</sup> To him this book of Revelation is poetry and liturgy. It is not a Rand-McNally map of heaven. It is not a timetable for the end of the world. It is full of encouragement, hope and comfort, especially for the oppressed. When Tutu was fighting against apartheid, he would say, "DON'T GIVE UP! DON'T GET DISCOURAGED! I HAVE READ THE END OF THE BOOK! WE WIN!"

"There were those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore."

Where were you the night of April 4, 1968? My husband and I were seniors in medical school in Memphis. That night Martin Luther King was assassinated outside of the Lorraine Motel.<sup>3</sup> Memphis became a police state. Clergy in Memphis decided to respond by marching to the office of the mayor, Henry Loeb. The ministers gathered at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. At the last moment, the Dean, William Dimmick, who later became the bishop of Michigan, (also baptized our two sons) went into the Cathedral and took the cross from the high altar. Holding it high above him (he was a very short man), he led the march down Poplar Avenue to City Hall.

"I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun..saying do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees."

The air was electric. Down the streets they marched. One Methodist minister writes<sup>4</sup> about one moment he will never forget. As the clergy are marching down Poplar Avenue, up ahead, he sees an elderly woman sitting on her front porch. As the procession approaches her, she stands up and screams, "GET THAT CROSS BACK IN THE CHURCH WHERE IT BELONGS!" I have left a picture of Dean Dimmick at the mayor's office in the fellowship hall. He took the cross out of the cathedral into the streets of a city on the verge of riot. He taught us where Christ was that day. Christ was out walking the streets of Memphis. Today my prayer is that at the end of this service we will remember Dean Dimmick's example and symbolically carry your processional cross out side this building into the streets of this city and this state.

"Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

On All Saints we worship amidst a great fluttering of wings, the whole host of heaven crowding the air above our heads. The old saints in their white robes and the baby saints in their diapers, passing one another on their way in and out of this world. Can you feel what a crowd we are today? Matthew is there, Thomas, Dunbar, William, Stephen, and Mary, plus all those whom we have loved and lost during the past year. We will soon call their names during the prayers. Listen for them to answer, "PRESENT."

On All Saints Day we make the very bold claim that all these people are our relatives.<sup>1</sup> They belong to us and we to them. Because of them and because of one another and because of the God who binds us all together, we can do more than any of us had dreamed to do alone. We do not have to do this alone. We have this company of saints sitting right here whom we can see plus those we cannot see-- all egging us on, calling our names and shouting themselves hoarse with encouragement to us. We are a part of them and they are a part of us and all of us are knit together in this communion of saints.

"Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation."

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Handkerchiefs," *Home by Another Way*, pp 208-212.

<sup>2</sup>Dunbar H. Ogden, *My Father Said Yes: A White Pastor in Little Rock School Integration*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup>Flemming Rutledge, "Apocryphal or Real?", *The Bible and the New York Times*, p.17.

<sup>4</sup>Katherine Moorehead, "Stepping out of the Tent," *Preaching through the Year of Mark*, p. 75.

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