



# “The Feast of the Saints”

*All Saints’ Day*

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**Sunday, November 4, 2018**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I don’t know whether this sermon is for you or for me. I’m fairly certain it is for both of us. Bu the motivation for giving the sermon and the thought behind it may be a little more for me than for you.

It’s our celebration of All Saints’ today, three days after the actual day for celebrating. It is a time in the church year when we intentionally recall those of our number who have joined the Church Triumphant - the eternal church and who, in the words of an old prayer, worship God “on a distant shore and in a greater number.” In just a little while, we will hear the names of those from our congregation who have died since last All Saints’ Day. Just their names may cause us to remember their faces, the sounds of their voices, a story we shared, a memory, or - more importantly - their example. We will be reminded of them and, as our Jewish friends say, we will let their memory be a blessing. So, that’s been on my mind this week.

We are also coming into the season of feasting. There’s something about the approaching winter that seems to be a cause for eating together. Thanksgiving is a time of gratitude for the harvest and what better way to celebrate the harvest than to try to consume most of it in one sitting? Christmas will bring another season of feasting from parties to family gatherings. It must be something very primal. It must be a holdover from those days before we evolved. We’re a little like bears, packing on the winter weight in order to make it through our season of self-imposed hibernation, waking and venturing out only when the weather forecast is for copious amounts of snow, and we shake off the doldrums and leave our dens to by milk and bread and toilet paper.

But the image of a feast is one of the Bible's many images of what the next adventure with God will be like. The great banquet table, spread with delectable delights and shared in the peace and harmony of God's banqueting hall. "They will come from north and south and east and west and sit together at Table," we will say again in a few more moments. The great feast. The Feast of the Saints.

Feasting has always been a part of my life, as if you could not tell. When I think back and remember my extended family, those memories are almost always of tables and shared meals. Sometimes they are the mid-day meal on Sundays at my grandmother's table. At other times they are picnics beneath the oak trees on our farm. The feasts of Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter are still vivid. There are times when my memory can take me back to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of my grandparents and the banquets at, what were to me in my childhood, the fanciest places I had seen.

But there were always tables and there was always more food than could be eaten. It wasn't fancy. It was simple and tasty and bountiful. Everyone had their specialty. Everyone pitched in.

And when the meal was over, we kids would sit and listen to the stories of the ancestors. We learned the names and peculiarities of all those who had come before us that we never knew, except that we did, because we learned their stories. The silly stories of the family would be retold and re-embellished. And next to the food, I remember the laughter. Conversation punctuated with laughter.

And when I think of that laughter, I can see them: Mom and Dad, Grammy and Pap, Mum-Mum and Pap-Pap, Jim and Blanche, Bill and Ellen, Cliff and Ethel, Clem and Ethel. I can see them all - long gone now - but vibrantly alive in my memory.

The Feast of the Saints.

In every church I have ever been a part of, there has been feasting. I sometimes wonder if the official Presbyterian hymn should be "God Be With Us 'Til We Eat Again." Church picnics with so many good things it boggles the mind. We would eat and then, go out on the church lawn and square dance. Yes, I am that old. I actually remember square dancing and we young people would dance with the more seasoned members of our congregation. Young people and old people over-eating in the name of Jesus and then doing their best to complete a proper "allamande left with a grand right and left" and if you know what that is you are not as young as you pretend to be. Our dancing partners are all gone now. Some of us have joined them. But there we were, eating and dancing. God's people feasting and delighting in being just that - God's people.

I can't help but think of the ladies at my last church, now gone, along with the church. This was the month of the great turkey supper. Two days worth of cooking to feed 300 people a turkey dinner as a fundraiser for the Presbyterian Women. Two days worth of nearly killing themselves, destroying long-held friendships, and testing the limits of Christian love, all to raise about \$1,000. All of them, down in the church kitchen, knocking themselves out: Lillian, Audrey, Pat, Helen, Sybil, and so many more - all of them gone now. But they would feed all those people and then hug each other and forgive each other for the ghastly things they had said and done. They would sit down, after everyone had left, and have a little of whatever was left over, and they would say, "That was the best one yet." God's people feasting together at the end of a long haul.

We've had a few feasts along the way here, too. One covered-dish lunch where I thought we would have to call the HazMat team to deal with Robert's curry dish. The very first church picnic after Wendy and I had been called to be your pastors, out at Meg and Lori Blair's house with terrific barbecue and a full bar - the only time I have ever been to a church picnic with a full bar. Kids fishing in the pond and people gathered beneath the tent, telling stories. The Bible Bunch going out in the middle of a cornfield to Hornville Tavern, eating one pound pork chops. Dinners for 8 and visiting in homes and building connections. Wonderful memories of amazing people - so many now gone on to the eternal banquet. I see them in my mind's eye. I remember them - most of them fondly. I did not have to lie at their funerals. Maybe stretched the truth a bit, but mostly told the truth. But I know they are there: the saints of God, gathered around tables, feasting together in the sacred bonds of the Spirit.

The prophet Isaiah tells us of a feast - "a feast of rich foods, a feast of well-aged wines, or rich food filled with marrow, or well-aged wines strained clear." God will set a feast for all people and the people will sit together and feast together. And God will destroy all that is not of God, and God will swallow up death forever. God will wipe away every tear from every face. And all will be put right once and for all.

This is the Feast of the Saints. This is the image we are given, not only by Isaiah, but by John the Revealer, and by Jesus himself. The kingdom of heaven is like a great banquet, like a great wedding feast, like a great coming together of people to sit together and establish and re-establish those sacred connections that are essential to our lives. Maybe if we feasted together a little more the world wouldn't be quite so messed up.

And today, at this Table, the Feast of the Saints is celebrated in part, even as one day it will be celebrated in full. Today we will break the bread and share the cup and remember the One who taught us the way of love and service. And, though we cannot see them, we will be surrounded by all those who took their place at this Table in life and who now stand with us - invisibly and inaudibly. We will be joined with all of them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Feast of the Saints. A table set by God for all God's people. No expense has been spared. The Feast of the Saints. Come to the feast that is for now and evermore. Amen.



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