

Breaking Bread with the Dead

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Romans 1:7-12; Luke 6:20-31

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 2) 2025

All Saints Sunday

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Often the most enjoyable pieces in the *New York Times Book Review* are the interviews with various authors. Very popular is the question often asked, “You’re organizing a dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?”

Not long ago, Cressida Cowell, author of *How to Train Your Dragon*, responded, “Shakespeare, George Eliot, and Homer, ... You have to invite the dead ones. Although one of the many wonderful things about reading is that this is what you are already doing. You are having a dinner party with people who died, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of years ago, and whose voices and feelings and intelligence and opinions are all captured in the extraordinarily brilliant and irreplaceable technology that is a book. Now *that* really is magic.”

W.H. Auden called this “breaking bread with the dead.”

In an essay called, “Some Reflections on the Arts,” Auden said, “One of the greatest blessings conferred on our lives by the Arts is that they are our chief means of breaking bread with the dead, and I think that, without communication with the dead, a fully human life is not possible.”

This reminds me of a classic essay on the importance of reading old books by C. S. Lewis. Lewis said, “Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at

seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means old books. ... They made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes ... Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.” (From Lewis’ introduction to “On the Incarnation”)

This morning, on this All Saints Sunday, I remind us that in church we read old books, and we especially read this old book, the Bible. And we’re doing all kinds of old things and practicing old rituals, all of which are about breaking bread with the dead, as we worship the Living God. What we say and do around the Lord’s Table this morning is 2000 years old. The practice of preaching and praying goes back even further. The practice of singing hymns the way we do goes back to Martin Luther in the mid-1500’s.

Nevertheless, these are the old stories we keep telling and listening to and having conversation with, these are the authors we’re wrestling with, these are the holy ones who challenge us, inspire us, but also who might aggravate us. That is the way to think about these old stories and think about old books. We continue to have conversation, dialogue with these old stories and with the people of these stories across the centuries. To put in the language of T. S. Eliot, this is the “communication of the dead” (see Eliot’s “Little Gidding” p. 139 in *T. S. Eliot The Complete Poems and Plays 1909 - 1950*). We are carrying on a conversation that started long before we came around and will continue long after us. It is a conversation with those who have gone before us and even now make up what is called the “communion of the saints.” Every Sunday morning we are being

gathered by the Holy Spirit from around the world, and from across time. In and through the Living Christ we are all joining in a conversation that has been going on for a long time. We are breaking bread with the dead.

So, when we regather, when we re-member, we are breaking bread with the dead from across the centuries but also from recent times. Oftentimes, too recent. We remember and are inspired and receive guidance from Martin Luther King, Jr. from the 1960's and Julian of Norwich of 14th century England or Roger Williams of 17th century Rhode Island. But I also remember Bill Moyers who was an encourager to me and who died this past June, or our own David Henson, whom we lost only this past January. Founding Austin Heights' member R.G. Dean died in Austin this year, as well. These, and so many more, are our saints. We break bread with them this day, and every time we gather.

At the conclusion of my 36 years here as pastor, I am acutely aware of breaking bread with Dwayne and Angela Key, Archie McDonald, and Bob Carroll, Carl Davis, Judy Patch, Judith Cooper, and I could go on and on.

According to the New Testament, like here in the lesson we read this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans, "saints" refers to the whole community of the new creation in Jesus Christ. Everyone who has been called by Jesus Christ to be a disciple are among the saints. Furthermore, those who have gone before us, those with whom we are conversing across time, are the saints, as well. In the Old Testament, the term that is most synonymous with the New Testament "saints" is "holy ones" or "holy people" used here in the lesson we read from Daniel.

We participate in this ongoing conversation across time with the saints for a

variety of reasons. Like C. S. Lewis said, so we won't keep making the same mistakes generation after generation and so we will be able to have the vantage of not being blinded by the present. Conversation with the saints, communion of the saints, gives us the critical ability to better judge the present, so we won't be suckered by whatever happens to be the preoccupation of the moment and so we will have the benefit of ideas which have been around for a while.

Among many things, this is why we study history.

Milan Kundera, in his 1979 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has a character who says, "the first step in liquidating a people ... is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was" (p. 218).

It makes me wonder if Austin Heights will need to teach history in the future. The state and corporate schools want to rewrite so much: an insurrection becomes a stroll through the capital, indentured slaves were really just workers in the fields, any mention of racism gets erased, and the holocaust is denied.

At the same time, this is not to say everything and everyone of those who have gone before us were perfect. Quite often while these holy ones challenge us, we find ourselves critical of them. Many of them believed things we don't believe or practiced the faith in ways we now know better. But we do not dismiss them or ignore them. We are to wrestle and learn from our past partly so we will be better at our present and have the rootedness to stand as we move into the future. When break bread with the dead, we discover we are alike in many ways. But we also

discover we are unlike, too. But our encounters with unlikeness might be how we grow the most. It increases our personal density.

Writer Thomas Pynchon has a passage in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* in which a character says our “Personal density is directly proportional to temporal bandwidth... The more you dwell in the past and in the future the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you’re having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago...”

For Pynchon, personal density is how solid and rooted we are and whether we are able to withstand the storms that come our way. Temporal bandwidth is how wide or narrow is our understanding and sense of time and history. If we only live in the moment, the narrow now, then our temporal bandwidth is thin and flimsy. And given our increasing obsession and addiction to various social media and technology’s emphasis on speed and data and such, our temporal bandwidth is very thin and therefore our personal density has no staying power. But temporal bandwidth is increased the more with listen to and struggle with our past and our ancestors.

All of this, as the Apostle Paul says to the saints at Rome, is so we will be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. Paul is telling the saints in Rome how to increase personal density. Theologian Jim McClendon used to say, “Boldness was gained by adherence to the bold.” We gain courage by hanging around those who are courageous and telling stories of the heroes of the faith who embodied courage. We have this conversation across time so we will be able to keep going on the Christian journey. So, we won’t give up. So, we will be

faithful. And when we don't know how to be faithful, we look at those who have been faithful before us and around us to show us. And when we forget who we are and who we are called to be, we remember the saints who walked before us to remind us.

Daniel was in exile, surrounded by the customs, the ways, the values, the practices of imperial Babylon. He was being worn down and worn out. Yet God reminded him that he was part of a kingdom which lasted forever and ever, a kingdom of holy ones, of saints who would outlast Babylon and all the earthly kingdoms to come. The Apostle Paul wrote to a tiny band of Christians in the powerful city of Rome, the center of the Roman Empire. And Christians across the centuries have read and remembered these stories and these saints and received encouragement.

Today we come to the table with our neighbors both here, now, as well as our ancestors from years and even centuries gone by. Here at the table, we get to know each other in our differences as well as our likenesses. Today, we take our place at the table and receive our courage as well.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.