**Six Degrees of Connection    Text:  Revelation 7:9-17 by Reverend Victoria Ney 11/1/20**

You’ve probably heard of Six Degrees of Separation.  Maybe you’ve even heard about “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.”

This is a game that was devised by a few Pennsylvania college boys with far too much time on their hands.  (I wonder if their parents knew what was going on while the tuition money was being paid!)  Anyway, from this humble beginning, a web site was created, a book was published and a nationwide fad was born.  Kevin Bacon, an actor from Philadelphia with impressive screen credits, appeared on commercials for debit cards, trying to prove his identity to store clerks through a complex web of relationships.  It was all based on Six Degrees of Separation, which suggests that we’re all connected to one another by no more than six stages of circumstance or acquaintance.

I think we get a kick out of this game, because we’ve all had small-world experiences, discovering that we are linked to complete strangers by surprisingly small networks of relationships.

For instance, our summer neighbors in Atlantic City live in Philadelphia.  Richard and I and our boys also lived in Philadelphia in the 90s.  Turns out we all lived in the same neighborhood, went to the same WaWa and pizza place right across the street—and may indeed have even been in those places at the same time, never knowing that 15 years in the future we’d be neighbors elsewhere and be very close friends.

So, whether it is by six degrees or 600, the idea of connection will always intrigue us.  I think small-world experiences give us a sense of security.  We want the world to be an orderly place.  And we desperately want to be connected to others, so that we won’t feel lost in a complex, confusing, cold and sometimes cruel world.

But regardless of the size of our separation from strangers, there is one link in our life that can always be shortened and strengthened:  our relationship with God.  No degree of separation—only degrees of connection.

In our search for a shorter link to the Lord, the saints of God can show us the way.  In Revelation, John has a vision of heaven.  In it he sees a great multitude from every nation standing before the throne and before the Lamb of God, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.  They cry in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”  (7:9-10)

Few portrayals of heaven can match the power and beauty of this, yet at the same time, this picture is the basis of the common caricature of heaven as a place where we will stand around in white robes playing on harps.  Since few people have much skill with a harp or much desire to stand around all day long in white robes singing hymns, the picture, for all its power, may not be completely attractive.

But I believe the key element here is the praise—people of all nations and races and colors proclaiming that salvation belongs only to God and to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.  They are all there in person, in the presence of God, which means, quite simply, there is no degree of separation—only degrees of connection.

We are also in the presence of God.  To live in the presence of God is to realize that God is working to forgive, heal, strengthen and save us on a continual basis. The problem is, we face a lot of distraction and temptations and interruptions, problems and real-life complexity on a daily basis, that threaten to insert dozens of degrees of separation between us and God.  Bombarded as we are by all those things, it’s terribly difficult to remain standing in the presence of God.

About the best we can do is practice it.  Brother Lawrence, a Christian mystic, suggests that the practice of being in the presence of God involves the realization that we’re constantly under God’s watchful, loving gaze.  It means constantly trying to envision God all around us and to be aware that he is still in charge of everything.  It involves the realization that God loves, us, delights in us, and desires a close, personal relationship with us.  One of my favorite verses is from Zephaniah (3:17):  “The Lord your God is with you; the mighty One will save you. He will rejoice over you. You will rest in his love; he will rejoice over you with singing.”

We hear about God’s great love all through the Bible.  God has always desired fellowship with us, beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden.  Then when Moses led the people through the wilderness, a tabernacle with the Most Holy Place where God would meet with them, went with them everywhere they went.  Centuries later, John records in his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14).  The Greek word for “lived” literally means that Jesus, the Word, tabernacled or pitched his tent in our midst.  And then in John’s last writings to us in Revelation, this same apostle records the words spoken in a loud voice from the throne of God:  “Now the tabernacle of God is with people, and he will live with them”  (Rev. 21:3).  God has always wanted to be connected to us.

A life connected to God is one in which we are constantly aware of God’s saving actions on our behalf, and one in which our day-to-day actions become nothing less that acts of service to God. In essence, we become God’s partners—God’s arms and hands and words.  As we become more aware of God’s presence and activity, we move ever closer to enjoying this life connected to God.

I have another confession to make this morning:  when I was a little girl and teenager, I hated Sunday night church.  Sunday morning wasn’t so bad.  I had my friends in Sunday School and Junior Choir, and we all went to church.  If you know anything about a Reformed Episcopal Church like St. John’s in Ventnor, the morning service is Episcopal liturgy.  But it becomes a Baptish Church at night!  The minister didn’t even pick out hymns in the evening.  He asked for favorites.  Inevitably, someone would always call out number 130”—which I say is #1 on the Christian Hit Parade—“In the Garden.”

I became so tired of that hymn, the words started to annoy me.  In my child mind, the words sounded sappy.   “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses …”  And the second verse, “… the sound of His voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing.”

But I’ve grown up and I’ve come to appreciate those words—especially the chorus:  “And he walks with me, and He talks with me.  And He tells me I am His own.  And the joy we share, as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

As we live the Christian life, there ought to be a time to go to a quiet place and shut out the world and walk and talk with God and let God tell us we’re his own—a quiet time in which God can embrace us with his love and rejoice over us with singing.

The saints of God are connected to God in this life and in the life to come.  There’s always been a misconception that the saints are all in heaven.  I heard about a man who said to his friend, “My wife is a saint.  His friend said, “You’re a lucky guy, mine is still alive!”

No, saints are a group of ordinary people—past, present and future—who have a close relationship with God.  They are not perfectly sinless people or especially powerful people, but they are profoundly connected people:  men women, and children who are linked directly to God and the Lord Jesus.

I put a little poem in the bulletin about saints—it’s actually a hymn written in 1929, entitled “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.”  It makes it clear that saints are those who have a close, personal relationship with our loving Lord.

The lady who wrote it, Leslie Scott, included doctors and queens and shepherdesses and soldiers and priests in her charming list of the saints of this world.  And at the end she insists that “There’s not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn’t be one, too.”

There’s no reason she shouldn’t be a saint, and there’s no reason you and I shouldn’t be saints, either.

In the Revelation passage, someone asks John, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”  John shrugs his shoulders, and the elder answers himself.  Those saints are the ones “who have come out of the great ordeal” and I believe that’s the ordeal of everyday life.

Although we feel like we’re pushed, pulled and sometimes pulverized by earthly events like pandemics, isolation, job loss, marital issues, death of loved ones, conflicts with neighbors, problems with children, saints have done their best to remain close to God.  They have been pushed around and perhaps knocked down by life, but they remember “that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”  (Romans 8:39).

When you come to the table this morning, remember that.  Nothing separates us from God’s love.  And when we believe that, we are God’s beloved children, we are the saints of God.  We are connected to God and each other and to the church universal and the church already in heaven.  This table becomes the banquet feast of heaven.  The past and the future and the present are bound together.  We are already experiencing a piece of heaven, now, but not yet.  We are connected together by the mystery of the Spirit and God’s everlasting love.  Amen.