

November 2, 2014 All Saints Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Revelation 7:9-17

Overtones

Today, All Saints Sunday, during the prayers we'll name people who have died, and then ring a bell, a handbell. One of the defining characteristics of handbells is their ability to produce overtones. That is, when you ring a handbell, you will hear the main note, the fundamental, but if you listen carefully, you can also pick out other pitches. When any one handbell is rung, there is also present a series of other pitches above it—octaves and fifths and thirds, a complex series of related sounds: the harmonics, the overtones. Overtones are present in stringed instruments as well—pianos, violins, guitars. In stringed instruments, when a single note is struck or plucked, the sound vibrations of that note, the fundamental, actually gets other strings vibrating as well, producing overtones.

Overtones occur not just in musical instruments, but in people.

When we name people who have died, we hear that note, their note, their name, the fundamental. We remember who they were, in all their fundamental humanity, and we think of how their life sounded. We think of the things that brought them joy, their work or their hobbies, their favorite sports teams. We think of the way they stood, and what they stood for. We think of the phrases they used, the things they would repeat.

We remember those things, we hear those things, when we say the name of someone who has died. We listen for the overtones. Like the handbell, we listen for the ways in which their sound includes other sounds, we listen for how a life is a complex series of harmonics. We listen and think of who they were, and how they lived, and among whom: their children, their parents, their friends. We listen for overtones. Like the stringed instrument, we listen for the ways their note set off vibrations in others around them. You can hear these vibrations in the way that those who have died continue to sound in our lives. You hear in when you root for their teams, or continue their work, pass on their passions. Their sound continues in the way that others have a way standing like they did, standing for what they stood for. You hear it when you hear yourself, hear others, saying things they used to say. "We believe in one God... We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church... We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Today, All Saints Sunday, we rejoice that God makes saints, people who have been intricately part of our lives, people whose witness we continue.

Today, All Saints Sunday, is a day to acknowledge people who have died, but even more it is a day to proclaim that life is not a single note. We are not a single note, living or dead. We are not one note, we are complexly related pitches, circles of fifths, circles of saints. We are not a single note, and our lives and the lives of those before us continue to set off vibrations, continue to sound, all of them a warming up, a tuning, a preparing, a yearning to hear and play and sing in concert one heavenly song.

The saints know it. The saints are singing it, plucking it, ringing it. What the saints play is a masterpiece beyond the confines of our mind. Our ideas of what that may be like, our wildest imaginings, the visions of Revelation, sounds strange—and yet strangely beautiful. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

We cannot explain it, but we can sing it: "Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" Holy Smokes—and Handel's Messiah: "Worthy is the Lamb... Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto him, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne..." We sing, with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation: "This is the Feast of Victory, for our God. ... Blessing, honor, glory, and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.