

**Sermon Series: Body of Christ,
“The Longing of the Body” by Jason Byassee
Revelation 7:9 -17**

**Boone UMC
June 28 2015**

I talked to a trusted retired minister about my last Sunday here trying to prepare myself. What did you say your final time in a pulpit? He'd moved churches multiple times in his career, but he never got used to it. He said "I didn't say much. Mostly I just stood up there and cried." I've thought about that a lot these last few months, and realize what I should have said (don't you hate the delayed reaction? We're all wise or funny days after the fact). Tears *are* eloquent. They say I love you, you love me, we've done things together that matter, we'll miss that, thank you. I'm struck how every instance of grief becomes a return to the deeper "griefs" that mark our lives. Each tear connects to all the other tears we've cried...and tears are grace. They're water - a reminder of our baptism. The church has spoken of tears as a second baptism. There's a reason you feel better after a good cry.

But in a minute, when I read from the book of Revelation, notice the last line.¹ "God himself will wipe every tear from their eye." Tears are eloquent because they're temporary. They're a sign that things are not as they should be in this world, things are not as they will be. The future we strain for is one where we're together with Jesus and all his saints. God and God's friends are eternal; tears are fleeting. Hear this word from the book of Revelation.

Revelation. 7:9-17

9 I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying "Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." 13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white? And where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple,

¹ From Rev. 7:19

and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more, thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

That’s the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

If you’re here this morning and you’re new forgive me, it’s a weird day. In Methodist land, it’s not uncommon for ministers to move every few years. It’s not required - I’m so excited about my successor David Hockett. I hope he’s here for decades. This will remain my family’s church as we go to Canada as missionaries of a sort, so David will be our minister too. When I said this to him without hesitation he said, “which means you’ll still tithe.” I said, “I knew I liked you.” Let me say one thing about David. Don’t keep your distance. As we’ve gotten ready to go, folks have kindly rushed to try to spend time with us one last time, and we couldn’t fit it all in. Thank you for trying. Thing is, we’re not cooler now than we were four years ago. And our first year we often wondered, dang, how come nobody wants to...you know, hang out? God has shared God’s life with us in Christ. God has come close. And God invites us to come close to one another. Let me encourage you to reach out to the Hocketts. Invite them over and out. They want to share their lives with you, and as of next week they’re brand new in town and hardly know anyone. Don’t keep your distance. They won’t. Because God hasn’t.

Today we mark a transition, and it’s a hard one. But nothing good in life is easy, is it? I’m so thankful that in the church we preach from scripture. It keeps church from being about us. The church is about God. The book of Revelation is called just that. *Revelation*. Not Revelations. There is one Revelation and one alone, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Calling it Revelations (plural) is to make a mistake. It’s to think this book is a series of snapshots of the future, like reading tomorrow’s headlines. If you think that, read a little more and you’ll see how confusing it is, if they’re headlines they’re garbled indeed, like a webpage that always loads wrong. But the one Revelation is Jesus. What do we Christians think about the future? Jesus. And his whole body the church. Some who read Revelation see it as a promise of coming fire for most, but blessing for a tiny pinched off few. And I don’t just mean religious people. Nearly every piece of entertainment on our screens with a glimpse at the future sees only misery. Think of the films or TV shows we see about the future; Catastrophe, war, zombies, vampires, aliens, weirdly...dinosaurs, or technology will kill us. No, climate change will kill us. No, we will kill one another. *Something* bad is coming. What hope do we see? Not much. Just that maybe me and my little band of well-

armed warriors might survive by killing off others. Our culture has no resources for hope for the future. We want it. We just don't see it happening.

The Bible by contrast sees nothing but hope. Because the future includes Jesus. Yes, there will be pain. God has no blessing without a cross in it. This passage talks about hunger and thirst and heat and lack of shelter. Revelation was written by Christians who were suffering for their faith. Its writer sees that. Yes, now there is pain. There will likely be more. But God will not only end pain. God will fill the world, the universe, with himself, you'll see. Creation will be so full of praise that there will be no room for tears. The church is a conspiracy above all else. Here's our gospel: Watch. God is going to do something amazing.

Three points for today, sorry to be so predictable.² One, the nature of the church. Two, what a minister is for. And three, the nature of our God. That big enough for you? Point one, the nature of the church.

³The nature of the church. I know y'all prayed and preached some about Charleston last week, forgive me for revisiting such pain, but I have a new hero out of that disaster. Her name is Nadine Collier,⁴ who lost her mother Ethel Lance a week and a half ago (there's Ms. Lance, God rest her). When Ms. Collier had her chance to talk to the murderer, she said how badly he'd hurt her. And she said she forgave him. How do you explain that? Jesus is the only way I know how to. We know we can't imagine the horror. One of my favorite things here at the church has been our midweek communion group. We're like a family - we can guess what each other are going to say, we hug each other whether we feel like it or not, we feast on Jesus together. Imagine if a killer joined us and we were all gone. That's what Mother Emmanuel Church faces. And to respond with grace when we all would understand a desire for revenge?⁵ I misspoke earlier, Nadine Collier, who's on the left up there, isn't a hero. She's a saint. A hero can summon up enough courage to do the right thing. A saint cannot. A saint shows only God can. We're a majority white church, and when race comes up we feel vaguely guilty, or sometimes annoyed, ok, move on. Many of us feel with regard to race that we should drop it. I mean, we didn't do anything, did we? Slavery, Jim Crow, Charleston. No, we didn't do those things. And often we're right, we don't do anything at all. But we *should* do something, each of us, to defeat racism, and make this

² I. The nature of the church II. What a minister is for III. The nature of our God

³ I. The nature of the church

⁴ http://edgecast.sdr-files.buscafs.com/uploads/news/photos/news_photo_64654_1434743973.jpg

⁵ <http://www.newyorker.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/remnick-charleston-manifesto-1200.jpg>

world a bit more the one God wants. The kingdom of God *scripture* says is drawn from all nations.⁶

“a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”⁷

If we believe that we can't do anything. We have to do something. In Christ, heaven has invaded the world. It's broken out right now. We call that church. And the church was the church God dreams about that day in Charleston. How about here, in Boone? During Apartheid Bishop Desmond Tutu would preach with secret police standing in the back. And he would preach to them. Hey, join our side, he would say, I've read the last page of the book, and we win! That's the church. Sure there are dark forces of hate. And they're invited to join the side of grace. Always are.

I've heard a commentator call this vision in Revelation one of "multicultural Pentecostalism." It's not just that God wants us to be nice, or not to be racist, though that's true. Here's what God says about race. God chose one. The Jews. To be his people. And in Christ God cracks open that one blessed people to include all people. Blacks and whites and natives and Latinos in this country...we're all gentiles. Invited by grace to worship the God of Israel. Let's show in our life together multicultural Pentecostalism. The Holy Spirit is transforming us all into the Jewish body of God's Son.

I'm struck by our transformation, mine and yours, in my four years here. Boone Methodist, I lack words to tell you how deeply I love you. I imagine we'll serve churches again, but I don't imagine we'll love a church as much as we love this one. And your cards and words and encouragement for me have shown your love for me and my family, thank you. My greatest sadness at leaving and fear at where we're going is you've loved my wife Jaylynn and my kids, Jack Sam and Will well. Thank you for that. I find myself closest to tears when I think of your kids and milestones that I'll be far away for. I pray God will knit us together despite distance and time. Another thing I love about you Boone Methodist, is you don't have a spirit of 'it's always been this way.' If you thought that, you didn't make the move out here to New Market from downtown. Think of the different faces of our church—Crossroads and King Street, 8:45 and 11, Guatemala and Zoe and Circles, young and old and everything in between. Where in our culture do people gather across such lines and make their lives together? Nowhere. We are a wonderful church. And we could be

⁶ Revelation 7:19

⁷ "Multicultural Pentecostalism"

better. My job as a minister is to point to that “better”. And to say, “Yes, God’s been good. Now, what difficult new thing is God calling us to next?” I think this is where some of our conflict has come from (and we have had some - it’s good, there has to be friction to heat anything). Sometimes I’ve said, “we could be better”, and you’ve heard me saying “we’re not good enough.” Those are two different things. If I have a fear about Boone in general, and our church in particular, it’s that we can say “ah, it’s good enough, it’s just Boone. It’s just the church.” Just like human beings our weaknesses as communities are often the flip side of our strengths. Boone is great because we’re not conceited. You can be rough around the edges in Boone; it’s not a country club town. Bless it. The weakness is we can be satisfied with good enough.⁸ But good enough, isn’t good enough.

⁹I wish I’d talked to you before about what a minister is for. A minister isn’t a professional nice guy, though some expect that. A minister isn’t a wizard, growing a church by charisma and sheer force of will, though the media likes that story. A minister isn’t a provider of religious goods and services to religious consumers. Sometimes we think that, so we can whine when we don’t get what we want, and take our business elsewhere. No, a minister is a representative of Christ. A broken representative (we’re all sinners); our prayers aren’t any more powerful or better than yours, worse often. But when we put on a robe, go into a hospital room, speak to the public, we do so representing Christ.¹¹ We reflect him, like a broken mirror, but one that does reflect. Now, you do too! We all represent Christ by our baptism. But we ministers have been trained, taught the wisdom of the church, positioned to lead, and the way we lead is by constantly asking the God question, “What’s God have to do with this budget? This ministry? This sin? This program?”. I’ve been so gifted to work with other ministers and staff here, I hope you know Boone Methodist, how gifted you are with your leadership, and friends, I’ll miss you and I love you. You shine Christ in ways vastly beyond your own reckoning.

Ministers are often keenly aware of our shortcomings. I’ve wanted to make that clear as y’all have said nice things, as the local media has said nice things. I’ve wanted to post a long list of my shortcomings, we all know I have ‘em. David will know better than most—the minister who follows us knows our weaknesses better than anybody. And I’m struck by the strengths of those who came before. But I’m so grateful for those who have come before me. Y’all have quoted to me George Thompson, Michael Brown, Rusty Inman, Marianne Romanat, Ron Smith, AJ Thomas, George Naff, John Fitzgerald. Not all of you loved each of them equally. And that makes

⁸ “Good enough is not good enough”

⁹ II. What a minister is for

for maturity. The church isn't about the minister. It's not about being fed (a passive image). It's about feeding. Serving. Loving. Being patient when it's not what you'd prefer. Some of you will respond to David better than you ever did to me and that's great, it's as it should be. And I can promise one thing. We'll change. Every living thing changes, the church is no different. Let me ask this of you. As we change do everything you can to see that we grow holier. More in love with Jesus. More in love with our neighbors, especially the poor. I love the story of the preacher in the African American church who knows he doesn't have his best that day, but a woman is "amen'ing", suggesting otherwise. On her way out he says, "Why were you carrying on like that? You and I both know that wasn't a very good sermon." She said, "Honey, just because you weren't doing your job, doesn't mean I'm not gonna do mine." We ministers are as flawed as the rest of you, maybe more dangerously so given what Jesus says about the Pharisees. And even so, do your job. Work to make our church and our town holier. And you'll find you're holier for it.

¹⁰Three, the nature of our God. What to say here. We know God is big. Cosmic. God created the universe as a reflection of the eternal love between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We worship God for God's might and power. And God is tender, delicate, gracious, like a mom wiping tears from a child's face. God is tough and tender both. I've noticed the trait I admire most in leaders is when they're tough and tender at the same time. It's easy to be one or the other. Tough and a tyrant, or tender and barely there. We need to be both. To see both at the same time reminds me of God, who flung stars into space and let nails be driven through his hands.

Well, we're at the end. I want us to do something. Grab the hand of God. It's a rugged hand, a working man's hand. You'll notice it has scars in it. And it's gentle because it's full of kindness. Grab that hand and never let go. And from Vancouver, BC, we'll grab Jesus' hand too. And the harder we hold onto his hand, the closer we'll find ourselves to one another. Hold on, and never let go. Amen.

ⁱ It's Rich Mouw's image

ⁱⁱ Echoing James Howell here

¹⁰ III. The nature of our God