
ETERNAL EXCESS
REVELATION 7:9-17
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2023
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember our loved ones, but we also remember our future—and the parents who are here for family weekend remember that there is a future where you don't have to pay tuition anymore. On this day, we remember **that there is more, always more** than meets the eye and ear, a surplus of God's unfathomable grace. And we need to remember our future, especially in the times we live, to remember that there is always more because it seems as if our present is a striking antithesis to the vision of God's future in Revelation. Revelation (doom dodo doom). Don't worry, I don't have any *Left Behind* book series predictions for you. As Christians though, it's as if we have a dream but are living a nightmare. "[And] when dreams go/ [a la poet Langston Hughes] Life is a barren field/ Frozen with snow (even though there isn't much snow here in North Carolina, but you get the point!).

What happens to a dream deferred? [Hughes also asked]

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

That last line hits home these days. Does it explode? As explosions of violence internationally in the Middle East and nationally in Maine reverberate in our souls and on our college campuses. It stinks like rotten meat (and that's worse than the smell of losing to the Tarheels for anything).

Prolific hymn writer and Yale professor Tom Troeger of blessed memory wrote:

View the present through the promise, Christ will come again.

Trust despite the deepening darkness, Christ will come again.

Lift the world above its grieving...

It sounds so simple. Did Tom know what it was like to be a human? I'm sure he did. And I'm sure John, the revelator, did too because the book of Revelation is known as "crisis literature." Christians were being persecuted for their faith in Asia Minor. This is why the elder in the scripture spoke of the "great ordeal." A time of brutality under Roman imperialism leading to martyrdom. It was a crazy crisis. It was *la vida loca*. But there was a dream, a hope, a vision that in God, **there's always more**. More than explosions. More than killings, more than crises, more than violence, more than fear and a sense of loss and scarcity.

In our day, there seems to be a purported deficiency, an absence, a shortage, a lack, a drought, a famine of social goodness. There's a social shrinkage into tribalism, us versus them, this camp versus that one. And we wonder like one of the elders in the scripture, "Where have they come from?" We all have our 'they' or 'them.' Don't we? And this cup of existential sorrow overflows into politics and education and healthcare and the environment and religion. There is a sense of loss or scarcity for some, a romanticizing of the pristine past, the glory days, and so some hunker in bunkers of brutality where people are ready to lash out, to hold on, to protect, to build walls, to isolate and insulate, because there's a belief, that there isn't enough in the world for all people, especially 'those' people. So 'we' becomes 'me' and 'mine' with an overdose on the narcotic of narcissism.

But in God, there's what Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "the liturgy of abundance." **In God, there's always more.** The old Spiritual would say "there's room for many-a more." But this is not how people often think. Our present doesn't match the promised future, the ancient dream. German pastor Martin Niemöller is known as one who heroically opposed Adolf Hitler. He was a young man when, as part of a delegation of leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he met with Hitler in 1933. Niemöller stood at the back of the room and looked and listened. He didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemöller replied, "I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man." Fear will make you think there aren't enough good things to go around for everyone so you must try to have them all for you and your people. Fear then festers into ruthlessness.

But in God, there's always more, excess, not as in being wasteful but in extravagance and the expansive amplification of love. "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." There is no shortage of any kind in this vision. But rather a sense of infinite, multiplicity, a number no one could count—beyond our thought, beyond our imagination, our sight, our knowledge. God is always beyond our human finitude. Always beyond, always more. It's an eternal excess of goodness, of love, of grace, of worship. Always more inclusion—every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages and, and, and. Always more. More joy because God will wipe every tear from their eyes, from every nation. There's no lack here. There's no want here. No hunger or thirst in our eternal home. Always more satisfaction, more rest. Always more worship, day and night—not just that aimed-for 59 minute, 34 second worship service on a Sunday morning.

Always more. Exceedingly. Abundantly. Above and beyond what we can see. God's future. God's dream. Inexhaustible, incomprehensible, calling us to be doxological all the more. There is a capacious home beyond our wildest dreams and desires, for God's way is always beyond our reach or understanding. A multitude no one could count. A surplus of hope that never runs out because God is inextinguishable and so is his grace and goodness. Our future is an excess of expansive community, extraordinary joy, and elongated worship! Not one tear but every tear. Not one nation. But every nation. Not one tribe. But all tribes. Multiplicity not singularity. Abundance not scarcity.

From Genesis to Revelation, we know that in God, **there is more** than enough for all. In fact, **there's always been more.** At the creation, repeatedly we hear "It was good. It was good. It was good..." Abundance. Goodness. The heavens and the earth. The evening and the morning. Waters and sky. Plants and trees. Birds and sea creatures. Male and female. **Always more.** We even hear, "Be fruitful and multiply." The day of Pentecost in Acts makes this ministry of multiplication clear when we hear who was there on that day: "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia and Judea and Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia and Phrygia and Pamphylia and Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs." **There's always more.** From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. A multitude no one could count.

Eternal excess is our future because a boundless God is our future. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Paul D tells Sethe, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow." Our tomorrow is today—the abundance of God for you. When Jesus feeds a hungry crowd in Mark's Gospel, a child only has five loaves and two fish. **But in God, there's always more.** Multiplicity. Five thousand people are fed, and twelve baskets of food are left over. There is excess. "From broken Friday bread comes Sunday abundance" (Walter Brueggemann).

At the communion table, we re-member our future in the present. We remember **there's always more in God.** So let's "match the present to the promise" and "do this in remembrance" of our God of abundant love. There's always more people—all saints—around the table, there's always more joy at the table, more bread and wine on the table, more worship because of the table:

*Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.*