

At table with the saints: 1 John 3:1-3

Would going to church make any difference in how you live—or die?

by [Bruce K. Modahl](#) in the [October 27, 1999](#) issue

"Pastor, my cousin is in General Hospital. Her name is Theda Manheim. The family doesn't go to church. Won't you visit her?" It was more of a command than a request. Clara Goggins was like that. She was known for her tangle of gray hair, ridiculous hats and sharp tongue. Her heart was pure, though—at least in regard to my visiting her cousin. She explained, "Theda's cancer has spread. The doctors told her yesterday that there was no sense in surgery. Chemotherapy may give her a bit more time and ease the pain, but that's all."

I went to visit. I poked my head in the door. Theda was flat on her back. Her husband, George, was propped up beside her in a chair. What struck me about them was they were doing nothing. They were not talking, watching TV or reading the newspaper. They were just sitting and looking. I figured they were actually quite busy. Every ounce of them, every neuron and muscle, was working to get their minds and emotions around the diagnosis that had been dealt them.

I introduced myself. The first thing out of Theda's mouth was, "We don't go to church. We wouldn't live any differently if we did, so we don't." She looked at her husband for confirmation, which he gave with a slight nod. He made scant eye contact with me, his eyes glancing off mine to gaze at nothing across the room.

What I almost said to them—what I so wanted to say but didn't and haven't yet figured out if it was pastoral sensitivity or cowardice on my part—was, "So it wouldn't make any difference in how you live. Would it make any difference in how you die?" That is the question I wanted to press on them. It is the question that would have made my visit helpful.

More than that, it is the question that would have made me God's representative rather than a reluctant pastor making a call just to keep a demanding parishioner

happy. It is the question forced on us by being in church on All Saints' Sunday. Will it make any difference in how we die?

All Saints' Sunday brings out the mystical and the sentimental in me. In the early evenings of my childhood, the mothers in the neighborhood stuck their heads out the back screen doors to call to their children. "Bruce, come home for supper," my mother sang. "Coming," I chanted back. "Roberta, Alan, Dale, Steve, Terry, time for supper," the other mothers sang in turn. We broke off our play and headed for the family dinner table.

Standing at the Lord's table on All Saints' Sunday, I call to supper all of those who've gone before us in the faith. "Let us give thanks to the Lord," I sing. "Coming," they reply, singing back, "It is right to give him thanks and praise."

Gathered around the table, I sing to God on their behalf. "In the blessedness of your saints you have given us a glorious pledge of the hope of our calling; that, moved by their witness and supported by their fellowship, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us and with them receive the unfading crown of glory. And so, with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn." And then we all sing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might."

The "all" singing those words are the hosts of heaven and us on earth. It is their hymn we sing. St. John the Divine gives us the words from the heavenly worship service as he heard them in his vision. We echo other words from the heavenly service as well. "Worthy is Christ, the lamb who was slain. . . . Power, riches, wisdom and strength, and honor, blessing and glory are his."

But when we sing these words on All Saints' or any Sunday we are joining our voices with those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb—in other words, those baptized who have died in the faith. That means this is the one time and place when my voice again sings antiphonally with my mother's. My father and grandparents, three cousins, two seminary classmates, several more from college and Clara Goggins join me in that song.

On All Saints' Sunday we name those of the congregation who have died since the last All Saints' Sunday. We invite the congregation to add the names of others, friends and relatives who have died in the faith. Here in church our voices join theirs. Once in a while, I think I hear those voices from the midst of the assembly.

Not only that. The meal we share is a foretaste of the meal they have now in its fullness, the marriage feast of Christ and his bride, the church.

"You mean all we get to eat in heaven is bread and wine?" one worried eighth grader asked.

"No," I said. "This is just a little bit to whet our appetite, to make us hungry for more. It is an appetizer from the heavenly banquet table," I explained to her. "There we will have no end to good things.

Here in this Lord's Supper, in this worship, in church, the distance between heaven and earth thins out, the great divide grows porous, the Jordan River narrows.

Faith makes a difference in how we die. We die in hope. Because that is how we die, that is also how we live.

I wouldn't claim to be any more moral than those two in the hospital room, the one flat on her back, the other propped up in his chair. But going to church does make a difference in how I live. In church we gather with the hosts of heaven around the throne of grace. Someone said we live out our lives between the baptismal font and the heavenly banquet table. We travel that distance between font and table every Sunday. It makes a difference.