

OPINION: Lawley's Chapel and the communion of saints

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By Beth Newman, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

(ABP) — One a recent Saturday afternoon, I gathered with a small group of family and friends around the graveside of my mother-in-law. The burial ground of Lawley's Chapel United Methodist Church sits atop one of the gentle hills of north central Alabama, looking across a farmer's pastureland to a tree-lined creek bottom.

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The oldest, central section of graves are marked by nothing but stones, probably carried up from that creek. Any names that they might have borne are long since gone. The landscape probably remains fairly unchanged, however, since those first bodies had been buried by the Methodist circuit riders in the 1840's.

Certainly, it had not changed much during my mother-in-law's life of almost 90 years. Nor had her life taken her far away from that place. She had never traveled farther away than Georgia, having spent most of her life along that creek and among those hills.

Leaving the graveside to return to our cars, my husband noticed a relatively new headstone bearing, of all things, the seal of Harvard University — the three open books bearing the word VERITAS shining in the slanting sunlight of an Alabama afternoon. A husband and wife were buried there. The inscriptions on the stone described him as a dedicated teacher and her as a nurse, but added that she had been born in Budapest. No one in our party recognized the names. Our lives had taken us far from

that place, but she had come a long way to find a resting place.

I know that with the multitude of serious political, economic and social problems pressing on us today, phrases such as “the communion of the saints” or “the mystical Body of Christ” can seem fuzzy or remote or pointless. I know also the responses that anything creedal draws from some of my readers. But it is my profound conviction that all of our discussion must be informed this aspect of eternity.

The divisions that separate the Body of Christ today — whether “fundamentalist,” or “liberal,” Democrat or Republican, or even Protestant or Catholic — as real and painful as these might be, are nonetheless not eternal or ultimate distinctions. The world that produced the woman from Budapest married to a Harvard Ph.D. could not, I imagine, have been more different from that of my mother-in-law. And yet, they were buried within a stone’s throw of one another, to become a part of that grand communion of saints about which we sing: “Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea....”

No doubt we are tempted to magnify the divisions of our own time and place, seeing the past and even the future in light of our present time. And yet, a dichotomy such as fundamentalism/liberalism is itself a recent one, with both sides being a product of modernity. An individual reading a biblical text for him or herself (whether literally or liberally) was not a concept our early brothers and sisters in Christ would have known. They knew Scripture by hearing it spoken, most of all in the context of worship.

It is this gathered communion of saints that we also join when we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are gathered before the throne of God in worship. This eternal reality transcends our parochial divisions and enables us to look upon one another — no matter which “side” the person is on — as also someone worthy of the blood of Christ and the love of God.

In a small cemetery on the back roads of rural Alabama rests not only loved ones, but also a profound truth: The love and grace of Christ make our communion possible.

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