

"Simple Saints"

1 John 3:1-3

November 4, 2018

All Saints' Day (Observed)

Our annual observance of All Saints' Day is a study in contrasts. We have an extra special service with a processional, recessional, and the singing of exciting and vibrant hymns like "For All the Saints" with all the pomp and circumstance befitting a king or, if we're talking saints, someone extraordinary like St. Paul or Mother Teresa.

Yet we have this special service to remember seven very ordinary people who have died from our congregation and who, although they are dearly loved and missed by their friends and family, would not normally command a celebration like this (and each of them probably would tell you).

The tone for this service is one of joy and excitement as we name all the saints from this congregation who have died in the Lord over the past year. Yet, for the family of these seven people we name today, the practice is, at best, bittersweet and, at worst, is very sad. It may be like ripping the scab off the wound that is almost healed to remember those whom you grieved for months ago. It hurts. There is sadness. So how do we celebrate a day that, on the one hand, is filled with such joy and excitement and, on the other hand, is filled with such sadness and pain? I would propose that we consider three questions today: who, why, and when.

First of all, we ask WHO are these people which we name today? They are more than simply people who happen to die in the past year and happen to be members of this congregation. The list of seven people today are called saints. This might be surprising to some to use this word in reference to them. Although they were near and dear to us and we love them greatly, they were rather ordinary people. There is no special representative from Synod or from the federal government to bring greetings as if these people were famous in church or state.

I doubt that there are any earth shattering, life-changing, or world altering things done by these people. They did no miracles (a requirement which is necessary to be named a saint in the Roman Church). These people worked hard and served society well. There were representatives from the military, from farming, industry education, parenting and all were faithful spouses. Now, don't get me wrong. These are all good solid vocations but not the kind that make you famous or get you on TV. They are were regular people just like you and me.

Who are these saints? Simply put, those who have died and those of us who remain alive are children of God. This is not a designation which we earn or deserve. They and we were not born into the family of God as His children. It was God's intention for that to be so, but the sin of Adam and Eve ruined that. That sin which we've inherited in our conception and birth and which shows itself in evil actions and in the failure to do good actions, broke off the relationship which God the Father had in mind for us, His children. We became spiritual orphans by our own choice, lost and dying, with no assurance of the present and no hope for the future. The Bible says that we are spiritually blind, dead, and hostile to God. Because of that, we also inherit the judgment against sin and punishment for sin: death. Like each of those people we

honor today has died, each of us sitting here alive will one day die because of our sin like they did.

Yet God loved us and it is because of his love alone that our status was changed. As our text for today says, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." What kind of love indeed! God loves people dearly! God loved the seven people which we remember today. He loves us in the same way. He took the steps to bring us back to himself. He sent his son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price for adopting us back into the family of God. If any of you have adopted children or know those who have, you realize that it is a very expensive and time-consuming project. However, God had such a great and deep love for us, that He was willing to pay the highest and dearest price by sacrificing His own Son. Jesus paid with his life. They whom we remember today were adopted as God's children with their sins washed away in holy baptism; given a new life and a new identity; and are His children, His saints – His holy ones..

One would expect this to be a great honor and privilege, but the life of a saint, a child of God, is often quite "un-saintly." Our lives are not necessarily any better or different than anyone else's. We have pluses and minuses, happiness and sadness, success and failure, joys and sorrow, and so on. There is all the suffering and pain that come with being a person on this planet which itself has been corrupted by sin.

But there is more. There is also the rejection and persecution of God's children by those in the world who hate God and are opposed to Him. We experience no honor, no power, or no benefit in being known as a child of God. In fact, in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus describes the life as a child of God. His way of describing "blessed" is a lot different than the way we understand. Jesus says we are blessed for being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek. We are blessed when we are persecuted, reviled, and spoken evil against falsely for Jesus sake. So, we have to ask ourselves the second question, "Why?" Why do God's children, His saints, so often suffer? Why do the people of this earth not recognize us as God's children and honor us? Why do God's saints die?

The answer is simple if not satisfying. St. John writes, "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." That the world does not know the children of God is because the world did not know the Son of God. The world hated, rejected, persecuted, and killed Jesus for His faithfulness in accomplishing God's plan of salvation for us. Therefore, we should not be surprised by the negative reception which the world has for us for being recipients of God's salvation. In fact, we should expect it.

Jesus often told his disciples, "If they hated me, they will hate you. If they rejected me, they will reject you." Did all of that mean Jesus was in error, had failed, or would be deprived of acceptance by the Father and eternal life in heaven? No. Jesus fulfilled all of the necessary things to complete God's mission of saving the world through that suffering and rejection. He lived the perfect life of a true saint – holy one – which was required of us. He offered up his life as a complete sacrifice on the cross to pay for our sin and to give us His holiness. He rose from the dead to conquer physical

death on earth, spiritual death and hell and to achieve everlasting life in heaven with God and all His saints.

The same is true for all of God's saints. Through the waters of holy baptism we have become children of God. Our sins have been washed away and we have become His saints. When the world hates, rejects, persecutes, or even kills us for being faithful to God, this does not mean that we are no longer children of God or have failed as His saints. It is an indicator that we truly are children of God, following in the path of our elder Brother, Jesus Christ. In following Him, we, too, follow Him into death. But death is no longer a permanent condition or a perpetual punishment. For us and all God's saints, death has been transformed into a momentary occurrence experienced in the twinkling of an eye that is no longer the end-of-life, but the gate to life eternal in heaven with God and all of His saints.

That leads us to our third question, "When?" When will we cease to be the doormats of this world? When will it be evident that we are truly children of God and saints of His making? When will we experience all of the good things which a Father has for His children? In our text, St. John gives us encouragement to not allow the discouragement to overcome us. Do not worry that things seem to be failing in this world. Do not become upset that evil seems to triumph all the time. Do not be afraid that what you see in your humble, weak, dying, or dead self, is what you get. St. John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

Jesus will come again and when he does, we shall see him as he is: not in weakness and lowliness, but in power and might; not as a lowly Savior to die, but as a glorious Lord to live; and not as a servant to serve, but as the King of Kings to rule all things forever.

And not only shall all of God's children see Him as He, but we shall all become as He is. As the word of God says, "But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself."
(Philippians 3:20-21)

This is something that all of God's children who die in the faith are already experiencing, including the seven saints from our congregation whom we remember today. This is where it gets exciting. Do you hear it? In the midst of suffering and pain in life, difficulty and frustration as you age, and sorrow and grief when death comes, do you hear it? As our processional hymn today says, "and when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again, and arms are strong. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

We gather here together to hear the distant triumph song of God, of His saints, and of us. We hear it in the reading of His Word with all of its warnings about sin and death and all of its promises of forgiveness and everlasting life. We gather together around the altar "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven (the saints) " to receive a "foretaste of the feast to come" in the Holy Supper of our Savior's body and blood. We fellowship with one another, not so much in donuts and coffee, but

in the singing of hymns, our prayers, and our encouragement for one another. The first strains of the distant triumph song encourage us and strengthen us as we wait for Jesus to come again.

On All Saints' Day, we stand with one foot on earth and one foot in heaven. We mourn those who are saints by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ who have died, especially those in the past year. Yet we also rejoice in the life of glory they are now living, a preview of which we saw in our first reading today. We remember saints who have been blessed by God to do extraordinary things, such as St. Paul and Mother Teresa. We give thanks to God for his gifts to them and are encouraged by their faith and action, seeking to imitate their lives. We also remember simple saints who, by God's power and grace, have shown a similar faith and performed similar acts, unnoticed and un-praised by the world. For all of them we give thanks because this is a day

“For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who thee by faith before the world confessed.
Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blessed. Alleluia! Alleluia.

We also look forward to the fulfillment of all God's promises for us, His saints now. And, as we look to the future, we have encouragement:

The golden evening brightens in the West.
Soon, soon to faithful warriors, cometh rest.
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen