

“For ALL the Saints”
Matthew 5:1-1

November 5, 2017

All Saints' Day (Observed)

Have you ever been a part of the group where you felt uncomfortable – that you really didn't belong? Maybe it was honors English or advanced math in school. You looked around and thought, “These guys are smart. I'm sunk.” Maybe it was at a business meeting or retreat for all of the young and upcoming talent in your company. After a session or two, you look around and wonder, “What am I doing here?” Maybe it was at a party or a fund-raising dinner to which you are invited. Very quickly, you realize that you do not possess and cannot afford even the clothes to get into a party like. You realize, as you check your coats, that the cost to do that is roughly equivalent to the price you paid by the coats in the first place. At dinner you realize that all the people surrounding you have much more more money than you could ever dream of having. In any of these situations you feel uncomfortable. You don't fit in. You feel that you don't belong.

The same could be said for our celebration of All Saints' Day. Today, we are remembering and celebrating God's holy saints. Maybe such a celebration brings back memories of honors English, that business retreat, or that ritzy fund-raising dinner. You hear about all of these saints, the holy people of God, and you think yourself, “What am I doing here? I sure don't fit in.” Is that the way we should feel? I guess it all depends on how we define and understand the term “saint”.

The traditional understanding of a saint is that of a “super Christian”. A saint is someone who is above everyone else – every other Christian – in moral behavior. A saint is one who lives a holy life and is formally declared to be a saint because of that holy life. In some traditions, it is also necessary that verifiable miracles can be attributed to this potential saint. Therefore, sainthood is achieved only by one's own personal effort in leading biblically pure lives, and accomplishment not achieved by many.

When we encounter that view of saints, we immediately feel uncomfortable. I think many, if not all, of us would not consider us to be “super Christians”. In fact, we may look at our lives and wonder whether we are even Christians at all. We see our sin and our failing and may despair over it. We fail to see the good that we do and, even if we do see it, we may not feel it to be very “saintly”. In considering those who have been declared to be saints by the church, we immediately realize that we don't fit into that group. While we may do some good and avoid some evil, we are no saints.

The fact of the matter is that none of us are good enough to be saints on the basis of our own behavior. The Scripture says that we are sinners from the moment of our conception within our mothers. Observation tells us that we do sin – performing the bad which God forbids in failing to do the good God commands – every day we are alive. We can never be holy enough to stand in the presence of a holy God.

However, we have plenty of company the Word of God says (and experience shows) that all have sinned. All fall short of the glory of God. Those self-proclaimed saints and those declared to be saints by certain churches' hierarchies are part of this

group of sinners as well. So, we don't really fit into that group of plaster saints. We do not exhibit the "holy behavior" which such a position would require.

But what about the people in the large multitude in our first reading for today from the book of Revelation? Now THOSE are really saints! They look exactly as saints should look: clothed in white robes. This is probably the second most popular view of saints – the people of God who stand around the heavenly throne for all eternity.

These saints display the true nature of saints. In addition to perfectly fulfilling the worship of God for all eternity, these saints enjoy an outstanding life. They are free from sin and its condemnation, having washed their robes in the blood of The Lamb. They are truly holy in their essence and in their behavior. They are free from persecution and rejection, having come out of the great tribulation (or suffering) which they endured on earth. They are free from death, having died and passed from death to life by virtue of Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the tomb.

These saints enjoy a trouble-free existence. They serve God day and night in His Temple in heaven. God shelters them with His presence. They neither hunger nor thirst. They are not threatened by the scorching heat of the sun or any other problem. They are directly shepherded by the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who leads them to springs of living water. They have no sorrow or sadness for God Himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

What about this group? Do you think that you would feel any more comfortable among them? Or would you feel out of place? We feel uncomfortable among the declared saints because our behavior is not as good as theirs. We may feel uncomfortable among the heavenly saints because our environment is not as good as theirs. Let's face it, we live in a world which is not as God created it to be, holy and without flaw. Instead, the world around us is fallen from holiness and perfection to what it is today on account of man's sin. It has been corrupted and ruined by sin.

This means we will always experience negative things for being Christians in this world. We will always be rejected, laughed at, ridicule, and so on. For some, this may extend to physical suffering and persecution which lead to death. It also means we will always suffer in this life as human beings. Hunger, thirst, sickness, poverty, and even death, will be our lot in this world. Simply being Christian will not make earth into heaven on earth for us.

We feel uncomfortable and ill at ease because we we fail to understand the whole concept of saint: how it is achieved and where it exists. First of all, sainthood is never earned nor is it ever declared by human authority. To be a saint means to be holy and free from sin. None of us can be holy in perfect on our own. Everyone, including the most pious of people, are born with sin and do sin. Strong religious commitment an extraordinarily good works cannot restore perfection.

However, the holy Son of God came from heaven to earth to share His holiness with us by offering His perfect life as the sacrifice for all sin. His death on the cross earned forgiveness for all. That forgiveness is applied to us individually when our sin is washed away in Holy Baptism. You hear the forgiveness of sin spoken to you in the Holy Absolution here in Divine Service. You taste the forgiveness of sin given to you in

the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with the bread and wine in Holy Communion.

Having been fully and forever forgiven of all your sins, God declares you to be holy in His sight. It is that declaration that makes you, I, the saints in heaven, and even the saints declared by the Church on earth to be saints. Holiness and, thus, sainthood are given as gifts to be received by faith. When God's saints respond with faith in God's promises and loving obedience to his will, neither the faith nor the good works are causing sainthood, but are the result of sainthood.

Secondly, the life of a saint does not begin in heaven. It ends up there, but it doesn't start there. Therefore, the life of a saint – you and me – is not a life of ease and pleasure. Sainthood takes place in the mire and muck of this sinful world. In our text for today, often referred to as the Beatitudes, Jesus is not giving some sort of prescription for how to become a saint. Rather, Jesus is giving a description of how things are for God's saints in the world here and now. Jesus begins his ministry with this Sermon on the Mount in which he is talking to his disciples, not the world, about life as a saint and why it is always blessed.

Those Christians who are "poor in spirit" are those people who realize that they have nothing spiritually to bring to God. Nevertheless, they are blessed because, although they have nothing now, they shall have everything – the kingdom of heaven.

Those Christians who mourn (and mourning is always a significant part of our life as saints on this earth) need not despair or give up. They are truly blessed because, in the end, they will receive comfort from God.

As Christians who are meek (that is who are humble as saints and are powerless to change the world). Are still blessed because they shall inherit the land – the Promised Land of God. Instead of having nothing, as they do now, the saints of God will (as one preacher on this text said) inherit the whole shooting match.

There are those Christians who hunger and thirst for righteousness, that is holiness. And why do they so hunger and thirst? It is because they do not have righteousness on their own and they know it. Still, they are blessed. Why? Because their deep desire to be holy shall be satisfied. Declared righteousness is their own right now. Righteousness carried out in word and deed to perfection will be theirs in heaven.

Those Christians who are merciful do not earn God's mercy, but reflect God's mercy which has been given to them through Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are blessed. They have received mercy and are therefore free to show that mercy to others, as well.

Being pure in heart is often ridiculed these days. It certainly doesn't seem to be very valuable or helpful to be that way. However, Christians who are pure in heart, a heart given to them by God, washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ,, and declared to be holy by the Holy Spirit are blessed. Why? Because in their purity given by God, they shall see God face to face.

Those Christians who are known to be peacemakers, those who can bring reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace to our conflicts are blessed. It is a dirty thankless job to do so and is often very difficult. Yet those who work at making peace are blessed because they shall be called sons of God for having done so.

In addition to being blessed in the midst of a very ordinary life, the saints of God have reason to rejoice and celebrate in the midst of suffering and pain. When we are persecuted, reviled, and have people speak really nasty stuff against us, we may think that this is not good and should be avoided at all costs. However Jesus says that those who are persecuted, not just for any old thing, but for the sake of righteousness – Christ’s righteousness, are blessed because that righteousness brings them the kingdom of heaven.

When people revile us and persecute us and say all kinds of evil against us, even though the evil is false, we are not to despair or give up. Instead, Jesus says, you are blessed and you should rejoice and be glad. Why? There are two reasons. One is that you are on the side of truth when you receive that reception. The faithful prophets of God in the Old Testament receive the exact same reception. In every age, the false prophets are received and celebrated, while the true prophets are often rejected hated, and killed. Secondly, in being faithful to the truth, the saints of God are assured of a great reward in heaven.

To sum it all up, first, saints are people who are indeed holy, but not by their effort or the declaration of any church institution, but only by God’s doing in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ whose life, death, and resurrection has earned forgiveness for us and given holiness to us. Rejoice at what God has done!

Secondly, while sainthood indeed arrives at and finishes up in heaven, it exists here on earth now and is reflected in what we believe, confess, and do. Sainthood on earth may not seem to be as glorious as sainthood in heaven. However, the life of the saint now is blessed because it leads to life of saints in heaven. That heavenly dwelling place of saints is made possible also by God’s mercy in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead which gives life to Him, as well as, all of His saints.

The festive processional hymn, “For All The Saints”, is a time honored tradition for this day. While we focus in on the word “Saints” when we sing this, we often overlook or even forget the word “All” which is there, too. We do that because we often don’t consider, remember, or honor all the saints. We limit our view to those declared saints by the church on the basis of their behavior, perhaps with a tinge of resentment and insecurity, knowing that we can never be like them. Or, we may focus our attention simply on the saints in heaven who have gone before us with a feeling of jealousy or envy, knowing what life they enjoy now compared with ours. But this hymn expresses what this day is all about. It not about self-made saints. And it is not about just the saints in heaven. It is about all the saints – those in heaven and those honor. Four, although there is difference in location and difference in condition, there really is no difference among the saints as the hymn says, “Oh, blessed communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they and glory shine; Yet all are one in Thee, for all our Thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!” Amen.