

Peace Lutheran Church
Great Falls, MT
All Saints' Day 2020

**Jesus Speaks
And
Saints Are Blessed**

If we were brave souls in keeping with the literal text, this morning's commemoration of All Saints' would take place on some snowy Montana peak. Matthew informs us that the crowds were assembled below as Jesus ascends the perch of a Palestinian peak. And the disciples came to Him because that's what disciples do. In typical rabbinic custom, our Lord sits down to teach, and what a teaching He gives. Doctrine comes from the open mouth of Jesus and flows downward to His waiting disciples. He speaks, and they listen to His voice.

You will want to take special note of the present tense along with the future tense in these truths from Jesus' lips. "Blessed are...for they shall be." What you are today as saints on earth is yet to be fully realized in the now, not yet of God's kingdom in heaven. What you now are in Christ is not yet fully comprehended or understood. Faith lays hold of what it cannot see, touch, or experience with all the senses. Nevertheless, we know that these teachings and truths of God are real and indisputable because Jesus speaks them from His very lips. The blessed here on earth now live in a hope that is yet to come, but has been promised by faith.

A few years ago while working for a notable lumber yard, one of the warehousemen hadn't showed up for work for the span of three or four days. Next thing you know, his obituary appeared in the local paper. Apparently, he had committed suicide. News of it filtered into the daily chatter of the workmen. When one of them began to speak ill of the dead, the foreman butted in, "Enough of this! Don't you know it's bad luck to speak evil of the dead? I'll have no more of this talk!"

Even the heathen know how to put the best construction on the deceased. While he was living, you could cuss him all you wanted and no one said boo. But there is something entirely saintly about one who dies, even among the wicked. Scarcely will the mourner make mention of the myriad of missteps of one mourned. By way of

illustration, ponder for a moment how major crime bosses during the hay day of gangster mischief have ever since been immortalized even in the communities they terrorized. Portraits hang like icons still to this day in significant public places of men the likes of Al Capone, George “Baby Face” Nelson, Bonnie and Clyde, Lucky Luciano, and other notables. In death, these villains have taken on a character of their own, an indelible mark as it were in the annals of history.

Remembering the saints who have gone before us, we likewise will undoubtedly speak admirably of our departed loved ones with glowing reviews. They have, after all, passed through the hardships and misery of life in this fallen world to a better, more glorious reality. And yet, one wonders if these sayings of Jesus from His mount of preaching could possibly apply to us as it most certainly has for them. Who truly knows what it means to be poor in spirit? How do you know when your spirit is poor enough for the kingdom’s riches? Have you mourned sufficient to be worthy of comfort, or do you have a way to go? What meekness is evident in your heart of hearts, the seat of all kinds of unrighteousness? You inherit an earth marred by sin and prone to violent outbursts in all realms of society. Your hungering and thirsting for righteousness—is it sufficient to save? When will you or I ever be satisfied with our own righteous deeds God deems as filthy rags? Jesus declares the merciful blessed with the promise of mercy received. But if mercy returning to you depends on your own display of mercy, be afraid. How has your manifold acts of mercy (or lack thereof) measured up in light of God’s standard for mercy? And what might we say in regard to those of us who are pure in heart? In light of what the 10 Commandments teach, we might well echo the sentiments of the Psalmist. “If Thou shouldest mark iniquity, O Lord, who shall stand?” (Psalm 130:3)

Furthermore, there are the blessed peacemakers to consider. Jesus promises that these shall be called sons of God. But sons and daughters of the flesh are by nature warmongers both with God and with the cantankerous neighbor. Children of Adam follow in Adam’s footsteps. Jesus Himself is quick to point out: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt. 11:12). This ought not surprise us as we see the Day approaching. Nor should it surprise us that this vicious warring and division has permeated the hallowed floors of our synodical conventions in recent years. Peacemakers we are not! So, don’t assume yourself a son or daughter of the King, an heir of the

heavenly kingdom. You and I don't have the stuff it takes to be even in the least bit blessed by God.

You want to insist that these declarations of Jesus belong to you. You object that I, a man of the cloth, would exclude you from far sweeping Gospel provision. You will by virtue of your own prowess seek to underscore your Christian virtue and holy living. "These words of Jesus are mine," you exclaim. They are mine because God will not turn away one who does that which is within him. God must love me, for God is love. You, pastor, won't give credit where credit is due. All you want to do is condemn everything I've hoped to be. Stop right there. Hear me out. I know how badly you want Jesus to commend you, to approve of your hungering and thirsting for mercy. Still I would caution you who stand lest you fall.

A man came up to Jesus with this sincerest of requests: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Our Lord's response is quite predicable and lack luster. "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." And the fool-hearted, rich young man was bold enough to inquire, "Which ones?" And our dear Lord obliged him with a laundry list of recitation so as to draw the man back to his catechism days. And then the conversation with Jesus goes sideways for the assuming righteous keeper. "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:16-22)

Many a sermon has cemented the Beatitudes of Jesus as good works of the Christian done by faith with promises attached. And all the congregation is quick to say "Amen. All these we have kept. What could we possibly lack?" To such as these who assume such sainthood by works of the Law, Jesus has this to say: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mt. 19:21). And if you and I are completely honest with ourselves, and entirely honest with God, then we too will do as the foolish rich man did. Walking away in sorrow, we will hold our great possessions (even those done with the most righteous of intentions) higher than God's commands. Indeed, when Jesus calls us to come follow Him, we are left dead in our tracks. Our will is not free, but bound by the flesh. And we know what happens to men and women of flesh and blood who sin. They shall surely die.

So then, that leaves us bereft of Jesus' blessing and promise. And this is true if we remain under the curse of the Law, but behold, God has dispatched to us a Second Adam, a greater-than Moses figure to be for us poor in spirit. He beheld our fallen humanity spiraling downward in sin and mourned the treacherous loss. He it is who came King and Lord in the meekness of human flesh to be born of Virgin mother. In perfect righteousness, Jesus came to hunger and thirst and thus fulfill all that we could not do. When Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy," He means for us to find full mercy and pardon in His works of mercy and His innocent death. While you and I are light years away from pureness of heart, Jesus makes a way for us to see God with hearts cleansed by His blood. At peace now, with God and one another, we join in a holy communion not our own but granted for Jesus' sake.

Therefore when you and I are persecuted for righteousness' sake, as we surely are in this vale of tears we call 21st century America, we know that the outcome is already secured in Jesus' cross and empty tomb. Yours is the kingdom of heaven, dear saint. Yours is the kingdom on account of heaven opened via the lips of God's own Son on the mount. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven by the faith you profess with your lips and believe in your hearts. Persecution comes to all who are followers of a crucified King. You are distinctly different than the world, even though you live in it. You are different on account of Jesus opening His mouth and teaching you to go a way that is not your own by nature. Blessed are you because Jesus says you are blessed in His perfect life and perfect death. Blessed are you, dear saints, because in this communion heaven and earth shall pass away, but the word of Jesus shall never pass away.

All Saints remembrances are opportunities for each of us to give thanks to God for the life of faith granted those now departed. In their deaths, we contemplate our own. What people shall say of us will likely be glowing reviews of life lived to the full. They may even be so bold to sing of us: "The golden evening brightens in the west. Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest. Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest" (LSB 677.6). But of greater tribute and higher praise is the One who makes our sainthood possible, who declares us truly blessed in His holy, resurrected presence. "For lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day. The saints of triumphant rise in bright array. The King of Glory passes on His way" (677.7). With them numbered may we be, here and in eternity. Amen.