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Date: 5 November 2023

Lesson: All Saints Sunday. Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

¹When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Soon after I began my first call to ministry, I met with a woman named Anne for the first and only time. She was at home, lying in her bed, and we both knew death was around the corner. I don’t remember any particulars from that conversation, but it was a good one. Anne died not long after. Three generations of her family were members of that congregation. Immediately after the funeral, all of us were gathered in the home of Anne’s daughter. They asked me to say a prayer before we began the meal. I centered myself – a nervous young pastor who still wasn’t certain that I had a solid grasp of all the names in this large family – and then I began to pray for us all. Not long into the prayer I said something along the lines of, “God, we give you thanks on this day for your beloved child, Saint Anne.” At that moment, the prayer was put on hold. I had to give time for the entire family to finish their chuckles. Anne... their Anne... a saint?!? Who is this new pastor kidding?!? Anne... with her quick tongue, her short fuse, and her propensity to tell off-color jokes...

is a saint! After the giggles were let out, I was able to finish the prayer. That experience actually became the beginning of a good relationship with the whole family.

All Saints Sunday: it is a day that we as the church give appreciation for the saints who have gone before us. It is also a day that we of the Lutheran persuasion hear the declaration that the title of “saint” is given to all who are baptized, rather than given only to a small, select number of Christians. That creates some challenges. First of all, there is a linguistic challenge. The word “saint” can have different definitions and varying parameters based on who is saying the word and how they are using it. Rather than argue with other Christians about that, it is easiest to simply say, “I’m working with this definition, and you’re working with that definition.” Another challenge is more philosophical. It results from the idea that if you and I – baptized people – have been given this label of “saint” by God, what does that mean about you and me, about God, and the way we are supposed to live our lives?

When we are given the label of saint in baptism, that reveals the Lutheran understanding that sainthood is something that God offers, not a title that we earn. We still may use the title with some names – like St. Peter, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Catherine of Siena – mostly out of habit or tradition, and that is fine. We are supposed to think of them as examples. Yet, you bear that title as well. So does everyone who is baptized, whether young or old, able to quote scripture or unable to find Genesis, every week attendees or attends only when the Texas Rangers win the World Series. Even someone like Anne – as ridiculous as it may sound – is a saint. Whether we love it or hate it, it is up to God, and God names every person a saint who receives God’s Word in this water.

That tells us a lot about God’s nature, to be honest. First of all, it is based on the confession that in baptism we are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus. Second, the title of saint is inspirational. You and I both know that we mess things up. Yet, even Peter, Francis, and Catherine weren’t perfect. Rather than leaving us to think that we are bound to mess things up, God says we are bound to Jesus. We are bound to the mission of making this earth more like heaven. We are bound to Jesus’ work to love, care, welcome, heal, and repair. You see, God is rooting for you. God delights in your participation in this work. It is not despite who you are that God does this. God does it because

God loves you. God desires for you to find meaning and fullness of life by living fully in Jesus and his mission of love and justice in this world.

Have you ever noticed that our congregation has added something to the traditional Greeting? The normal Greeting just says, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” We had a big problem with that. Not a theological problem, though. It caused a timing problem. The Greeting was too short, and it usually is the only thing that separates two pieces of music. Our musicians needed a few more seconds to get set for the next song. So we discussed it, and – to be honest – I forget where the inspiration came from, but we added a statement to the beginning of the Greeting. We came to a statement that addresses us from God’s perspective, and it makes clear that God is rooting for us: “Beloved of God, called to be saints:”

Those are only seven words, but they have much to say. This world can be a harsh place, and a lot of it can wear a person down. Yet, God looks at you, and God loves you. That love is not based on what you’ve done, or what you haven’t done. God loves you... loves you... simply because that is who God is. You are God’s beloved, and you are called to be saints. That doesn’t mean God wants you to be a holier-than-thou type of person. It doesn’t mean that you are supposed to be someone you are not. It means that the unique person who you are – with your experiences, passions, quirks, scars, personality, and perhaps a propensity to tell off-color jokes – God sees that person and knows they are beloved and who is able – exactly as they are – to bear some love and justice in this world. That is a driving point of the Beatitudes that we heard today. Jesus says to the poor in spirit, to the ones mourning, and even to the ones who are meek, among others, that they are blessed. Jesus doesn’t say the blessings are meant for the ones who seemingly have their act together. The blessing meets the people where they are. The ones who wrestle with their beliefs, the ones who struggle to make this world a better place, and the ones who generally are overlooked; they are blessed.

All Saints Sunday is all about God’s grace. The day is a reminder that when we are bound to Jesus, every sinner is a saint, and every saint is a sinner. God knows that, and I think we all know it, too. The reality of being both saint and sinner reveals a truth: we become saints not by our own will, but only by what God does for us. All Saints Sunday is all about God’s grace, because it reminds us

that we are mortal and death is an inevitability for us all. “How is that grace?” you might ask. Well, for starters, it should awaken us to treasure this life and the relationships we have while we have them. [A song that speaks deeply of this truth is “If We were Vampires” by Jason Isbell. You will not be disappointed listening to it, though you will be disappointed if you add it to your Halloween playlist.] The deeper aspect of God’s grace found in our mortality is this reminder we dare to proclaim today: somehow, mysteriously, God allows us to commune with those who have died before us. On this day we are invited to see their faces once again, to speak aloud their names, and to recognize that every person gathered here is uttering their own litany of saints whom they fondly remember. We read today that there are multitudes of them, beyond number, gathered together from every nation, giving praise to God. At this table – mysteriously, somehow – our voices join theirs in that hymn of praise. To have this day – All Saints Sunday – to name them and commune with them, is a gift of grace.

We join their unending hymn. We celebrate the new saints who have been named as such in the baptismal waters. It is life, it is death. What I love most about this cross is that there are broken pieces of glass in the circle. It is a reminder that in Christ, our brokenness is accepted, and – in Christ – God makes something beautiful from those broken pieces. It is only through the death and resurrection of Jesus that this countless company of saints is formed, making holy both our lives and our deaths. In life and even in death, God is making all things new. Thanks be to God. Amen.