

The Festival of All Saints
Matthew 5:1-12
November 2-3, 2019

“Blessed Are You”

The month of November is upon us, and the World Series has come to an end with our hometown team, the Nats, as the champions! November also means shorter daylight hours and the dying back of the landscape around us. Here in the northern hemisphere this annual cycle in nature parallels what our worship themes are all about this month: the end of all things and the return of Christ as King and Judge on that great and final day. It all begins with this Festival of All Saints on the first Sunday in November. Today we are especially mindful of that **“great cloud of witnesses”** (Hebrews 12:1) who have gone before us in the faith. But we are also mindful of God’s saints who live with us here and now, and those who are yet to come. Now in these closing days of the church year, we are reminded of our human frailty and our own mortality. Rather than gloss over things that we’d rather not think about, our faith in the crucified and risen Savior calls us to **“speak the truth in love”** (Ephesians 4:15) to one another. We affirm this saving truth: “On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures... He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end... We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come” (Nicene Creed). We rejoice in “the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting” (Apostles’ Creed). We are, together with all believers of every time and place, with those in heaven and those on earth, all the saints through the cleansing blood of Jesus. Because of this, “Blessed Are You.” That is the theme for preaching on this Festival of All Saints. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), what is commonly called “The Beatitudes.” What does that word “beatitude” even mean? As with so many words in the English language, it comes from the Latin, *beatus*, meaning “happy.” It is what the original word (μακάριος) here means: happy, blessed, fortunate. Again and again, Jesus uses that word “blessed.” When a word is used repeatedly in Scripture, especially within the span of a few verses, we ought to pay attention to it. It’s a good idea to dig deeper and see what this word is all about. What would the Lord have us understand here? What does Jesus mean that “you are blessed,” especially at times when it might not feel like we’re blessed, happy, or fortunate at all? When we’re poor in spirit, or mourning, or persecuted, or reviled? Those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful and pure in heart, those who are the peacemakers – these folks often receive little recognition in the world. They are not the movers and shakers. As a rule, their names don’t appear in the headlines. They are largely unknown by the world, but they are dearly loved by the Lord because their hope and trust is in him rather than in themselves. Because of this, “Blessed are you.”

We think of saints as people particularly blessed by God; those who enjoyed an especially close relationship with the Lord during their earthly life. We think of saints as people who lived out their faith in ways that might make us feel small and puny. We may be tempted to think that we can never measure up to them; we don’t even come close. People like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Mary, Peter, Paul, and a bunch of other larger-than-life people that we read about in the Scriptures. We think of them as people who lived long ago and far away; sort of etched in stained glass. But the truth is that they, like us, had their struggles. Faith for them was not always an easy thing, and they made mistakes along the way: Abraham passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister while in Egypt to avoid conflict with Pharaoh (Genesis 12:10ff.); Moses pleaded with God to send someone else besides him to serve as God’s spokesman (Exodus 3:11ff.); David was guilty of adultery and complicit in murder (2 Samuel 11:1ff.); Elijah was convinced that he was the only God-fearing person left in the whole land (1 Kings 19:9ff.); Peter openly denied ever knowing Jesus (Matthew 26:69ff.); Paul actively persecuted the

church (Acts 9:1ff.). Like each one of us, God's saints of old were flawed and imperfect people. Like each one of us, they were sinners in need of redemption. There are no heroes in Scripture except the Lord God himself who amazingly chooses to work through flawed, imperfect sinners like them – like us. Though we may struggle with thinking of ourselves as saints, that is what we are, as John tells us in today's Epistle reading: **“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are”** (1 John 3:1). And that is precisely what a saint is: a child of God. “Blessed are you.”

We are children of God, we are blessed, not because of anything we have done, not because of our own goodness or merits, but because of what God in Christ has done for us. It is God's gift to each one of us, received by God's grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, made known in holy Scripture alone. John's heavenly vision in today's first Scripture lesson (Revelation 7:9-17) makes this clear. John is uncertain about that great multitude from every nation that no one can number, clothed in white robes with palm branches symbolizing victory in their hands, standing before the throne of God. He is told by one of the elders: **“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb... For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”** (Revelation 7:14b, 17). That is a beautiful and comforting image to hold onto in life and in death. Today we remember and give thanks to God for all his saints, including those from our congregation who have fallen asleep in Jesus this past year. The candles on the Baptismal font are placed there in their memory, reminding us that in Jesus even when we die, yet shall we live (John 11:25). Through the grace of God in Jesus Christ that is given in holy Baptism, death is not the final word. Even death itself serves God's good purpose. Even the grave cannot destroy the child of God. Death and grave only serve to lead us from this life to life eternal through him who is both Lamb and Shepherd - the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and the Good Shepherd who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). Here in the Lord's Supper this sacred union of the church on earth and the church in heaven becomes especially real. “Together with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven” we are united as one in the true Body and Blood of Christ in this holy meal. “Blessed are you.”

Fellow saints, in the midst of life's struggles when faith seems weak, when we feel discouraged and disheartened in our journey of faith, let us take heart **“... since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Hebrews 12:1-2). “Blessed are you.” Amen.