

The Homily
6 November 2011
All Saints (Observed)
Grace Lutheran Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Matthew 5:1-12

And seeing the multitudes, He went up into a mountain: and when He was set, His disciples came unto Him. And He opened His mouth, and taught them, saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the Earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in Heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Who Are the Saints?

In the Name of the Blessed Trinity, Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Church Year rapidly comes to a close as we approach the Feast of Saint Andrew which is 30 November. In her attempt to take note of all the noteworthy aspects of our life in Christ, the Church has appointed the First of November as the Festival of All Saints. Since last Sunday was Reformation Day in Lutheran churches, we have determined to observe the Feast of All Saints today. Before us today is the question, "Who Are the Saints?" This is an important question that deserves our attention. Therefore, the theme of today's Homily is "Who Are the Saints?" We pray that God the Holy Spirit will be with us as we meditate on this theme.

As soon as we mention saints, we immediately think of notable people mentioned in the Bible. Names such as Peter, James, John, Mary the Mother of Our Lord, Philip, Paul, and Timothy come to mind. Perhaps you might name Matthias - he is one of my favorites - ask me why in Bible Class this morning!

These people are all worth mentioning and remembering. But we must be very careful. When we look at pictures of them in Bibles, or see them in stained glass windows, we get the impression that they were perfect. I looked up the word saint in a dictionary. The dictionary said that a saint is holy

person, a person officially recognized for having attained Heaven after an exceptionally holy life. In all due respect to the writers of the dictionary, they are not the authority of who is a saint or what makes one a saint. For that we must turn to the Source of all matters spiritual, Jesus Christ.

The Fifth Chapter of Matthew is known as the Beatitudes. Nine times our Lord speaks of those who are blessed. We will highlight several of these specifically today. But first we will note that none of these nine blessings makes a person a saint. Sainthood is the work of God the Holy Spirit. Let us recall one of the great rediscoveries of the Reformation. It is summed up in Luther's Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the truth faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on Earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church, He daily and richly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true. This is also the true definition of a saint. A saint is one, who by the power of the Holy Spirit, believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Our Catechism likewise shows us that sainthood is connected to Baptism. When asked what benefits does Baptism give? We learn that "It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this as the words and promises of God declare. Christ our Lord says in the last chapter of Mark "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be damned." Here we have another definition of a saint, one who has been baptized and clings to the promises of baptism.

Now we go back to the Beatitudes. Some become confused because they only choose to focus on three or four words. For example, they might say, "Blessed are the poor". Our Lord is not talking about the amount of money one has accumulated. If that were the case, those who are wealthy would be unbleisable. The complete thought is "blessed are the poor in spirit." Years ago, a dear lady told me that she liked to attend Lutheran services, but she did not feel that she was "a poor miserable sinner". I was shocked to hear such a sentiment from her. But sought to help her understand the true poverty of spirit of which we confessed. We must keep this poverty of spirit in view when we think of the Saints. Each and every one of them was a sinner. Each and every one of them found it necessary to say to God that they had sinned in thought, word, and deed. Each and every one of them had to admit to a sinful and unclean spirit. Each and every one of them found

it necessary to pray the prayer of David "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. [Psalm 51:10,11]. Our Lord says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." True poverty of spirit which is the confession of sins brings the wealth of Heaven through the forgiveness of sins.

Other blessings flow from the forgiveness of sins. Meekness is mentioned. When one experiences the forgiveness of sins, one is enabled to be tender and kindhearted toward other poor sinners along life's journey. Hungering and thirsting after righteousness means nothing less than wanting more and more of Jesus - His love, His wisdom, and His peace - to fill every crevice of our lives. The forgiveness of sins is God's mercy for us. Forgiven people are by nature merciful people. We demonstrate mercy to others because we know what mercy feels like. Every saint has felt the love, the forgiveness, and the mercy which Christ has given.

In all this, hypocrisy will not stand the test of Divine scrutiny. Going through the motions of outward purity, and being ceremonially correct is insufficient. Sinful pride, lust, envy and other evil comes from an impure heart. Thus we and all the saints pray with firmness the prayer of David, "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord". [Psalm 51:10]. "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God." The pure in heart will not have to wait for Heaven. They will see God with the eyes of the spirit with joyful confidence in this life. Even in the face of the problems and sorrows of this world.

Unfortunately, we live in a war-torn world. We hear of wars and rumours of war. Reports of hatred, conflict and strife fill the news. In such a disagreeable environment, the Saints of God have been summoned to be peacemakers. The power hungry and vengeance seeking people of the world have little use for peacemakers. Keep in mind, it matters not what the evil doers call you. God has the final say here. "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God."

It is inevitable that Saints will suffer persecution in this world for Christ's sake. They will endure mockery, false accusations, and outright hatred. All this is inspired by none other than the devil. He instigated Emperor Nero and others to arrest Christians and feed them to wild beasts, burn Christians to death, behead some, and crucify others. Only Satan could conceive such horrific torture and inspire others to carry this out. Even today, Christian men and women, boys and girls are resented because they stand out. There are things that Christians will or will not do, and things that Christians will say or will not say, because of our devotion to Jesus. The people who do not serve Jesus will notice this right away. They will find ways of making the Christian uncomfortable.

Christ tells His disciples that they will be amply repaid for all the disagreeable show of hatred which they are compelled to endure. Moreover, you will be in good company. The prophets of old endured the same treatment.

One last thing. Heaven is mentioned three times in the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven." "Blessed are ye when men shall revile and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in Heaven." Jesus is saying to you that you who are poor in spirit, you who find identity in the Beatitudes, you will be future residents of Heaven. You are the Saints. You are united with the residents of Heaven through Christ by the Holy Spirit. You are the called, the gathered, the enlightened, the baptized people of God. Twice in the Eucharistic Service we acknowledge this. In the Apostles' Creed, we confess that we believe in the "Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints" They are one and the same thing. Then in the Preface we hear the words, "therefore with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of Heaven, we laud and magnify Your glorious name. We are united with the Saints of times past in our hymn of praise. So the final answer to today's question "Who are the Saints?" is simple. We are the Saints!

The Saints on Earth and those above
But one communion make;
Joined to their Lord in bonds of love,
All of His grace partake.

One family, we dwell in Him,
One Church above, beneath;
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream, of death.

Lo, thousands to their endless home
Are swiftly borne away;
And we are to the margin come
And soon must launch as they.

Lord Jesus, be our constant Guide;
Then, when the word is given,
Bid death's cold flood its waves divide
And land us safe in Heaven. Amen.

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