

Pastor Joe Polzin
Revelation 7:9-17
“Ordinary Saints”
Year A – All Saints’ Day (Observed)
November 5, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day. But we may wonder, “Who *is* a saint? And *what* does a saint do?”

These were important questions being asked in medieval Europe, as well, the time of Martin Luther, the time of the Reformation. Last week we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, but today we have the chance to acknowledge one of the greatest, lasting impacts that the Reformation had on our world today. The amazing answer to: “Who is a saint, and what does a saint do?”

Now before Luther began any work of the Reformation, an answer was already being taught to those questions. To be religious, to be the best Christian you can be, to be “holy” (after all that’s what “saint” means, a “holy person”), there was really only one option for you: taking monastic vows, becoming a monk or a nun, and living a religious life in a monastery. After all, this was seen to be the ideal Christian—the one who would sell all they have, live as a beggar, take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and spend each and every day in prayer, confessing your sins.¹ This was a saint.

The problem was, not everyone could be a monk or a nun. Most people still had to live in the normal world of farming, working, raising families, doing the everyday “dirty work” of life. So, before long, you had an ordering of society, top to bottom. The really religious, ideal Christians, the few so-called saints up here. They would of course have an easy entrance through the gates of heaven when the day came. And then you had the vast majority of everybody else down here. And it was their hope, although they were nowhere near the “saint level,” that they could somehow be good enough to eventually find their way through the gates of heaven.

Martin Luther himself struggled for a long time in this system of spiritual stratification. After turning away from his lucrative future as a lawyer, he sought out the path that he thought would most please God, as a monk, and eventually a priest. He hoped that by being the best “saint” he could be, he would somehow obtain some relief from the guilt of his sins.

The problem was, he never felt that relief. In fact, the harder he worked at being the best monk he could be, the worse he felt. It’s said that he would spend hours confessing each and every one of his sins to his priest, and then when he walked out of the confessional, instead of feeling forgiven and a burden lifted, he would remember more sins, and turn right around and walk back in again. Being a so-called “saint,” Luther found out, was a life spent entirely focused on himself and his own works.

And then Luther had his famous Gospel discovery, when while reading God’s Word, he discovered that we are not righteous before God because of our deeds, but rather, we are righteous because of faith (Romans 1:17). Faith given to us by God, so that we may trust in Christ and *his* truly righteous deeds. Faith given so that we may trust in his sacrifice given to us for the forgiveness of all our sins. This is the pure Gospel. And it freed Luther from this vicious

¹ See Erik Hermann’s *The Reformation 500 Years Later: Being Religious*, in *Concordia Seminary Magazine*, Fall 2017, pp. 15-16.

cycle of trying to earn his own righteousness and salvation, and instead focused him solely on Jesus Christ.

And it answered the question for him, “Who is a saint?” in an entirely different way. Before a saint was thought to be those who, by their own works, appeared to be holy. Now, and according to God’s Word, a saint was one who had been made holy by Christ himself.

And we hear this today from the heavenly vision God gave John in Revelation. John’s standing there seeing this great multitude coming before the Lamb, streaming in from every nation, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, crying out and worshiping God. These are holy people. These are *saints*.

And one of the elders asks John that same question we’ve been talking about today, *who* is a saint? He asks, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” John says, “Sir, you know.” And the elder says, “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” (Rev. 7:9-14). *In other words, it is clear to John that a saint is one for whom Christ has died.* Therefore, a saint is you. And a saint is me.

And this vision of John’s *is* a heavenly vision, and a description of the future reality we will one day participate in when all things are made right again by God. *But* it’s *also* a description of God’s holy people, God’s saints, from all nations, all places, over all time. Including right now.

Friends, John saw you in that crowd. And he saw all those who have been made holy, not by our own works, but by the blood of the Lamb, the salvation that Jesus himself won for us. And it’s a comforting reminder on this All Saints’ Day, that even if death has temporarily separated us from those whom we love, not one of God’s saints is ever lost to Him. All Christians, over all time, are always joined together in Him, and so we are all part of that heavenly reality.

In fact, every time we gather for worship here on earth, like we are right now, we are participating in that heavenly praise, with all of God’s saints. We are part of the “communion of saints,” just as we confess in our Creed, and we are joining together with all of our loved ones in Christ. And we await the day when we will fully see that true communion we have with all God’s saints, and with Christ the Lamb.

In Luther’s day, his Gospel discovery and the work of the Reformation fundamentally shifted how people thought about saints. And the implications of this discovery were so far-reaching, it impacted everything. It was not simply a theological point to be discussed in debate halls, but it affected every corner of society and life.

People realized the truth that the ideal Christian was no longer one who would forsake this world to focus entirely on himself and his own works. After all, just look at John’s vision again. “The saints around the throne do not cry out ‘Faithful were *we*! Great sacrifices did *we* bear! Admirable virtues did *we* cultivate!’ No! It’s ‘salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! ... Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be our God forever and ever! Amen!’”² The focus is on what God has done for us through Christ, not on what we have done for God.

This shift in thinking made so that it wasn’t monks and nuns and priests who were considered the holiest of saints. It was every Christian who had a simple faith in what Christ had done for them. This brought great value to the simple life of work and family, a value which had long been lost and missing. It meant that you didn’t have to abandon the life God has given you

² cf. Erik Hermann

to live a secluded life somewhere, as if that were ever supposed to be the ideal. Rather, we live the lives God has given us, ever dependent upon Him and Christ's work within us.

And here's where the rubber meets the road: when you don't have to spend your life worried about how to get right with God, because that's already a gift given to you freely from God through Christ, it gives you true Christian freedom. Freedom from spending your time having to be concerned about your own works earning your place in eternity, and freedom to love and serve your neighbor. This is the Christian life. A life of good works not in order to be saved. A life of good works for the benefit of your neighbor because we've already been saved.

Lutherans called this vocation. The vocation of the saints. And Luther taught that the ordinary person, the farmer, the baker, the milkmaid, and the shoemaker, could faithfully fulfill their vocations right where they were. As workers, as family members, as citizens. Vocation teaches us that the truly ideal, Christian, and holy life is the ordinary life of a Christian.

And I can't emphasize enough how important this understanding of sainthood and vocation is still today. Today, our world may not be asking the question, "Who is a saint in God's eyes," but they are certainly asking, "What makes a good life?" And the answers provided from a secular standpoint, take all sorts of different shapes and forms. But they are actually all variations of the same answer that was provided before the Reformation. Answers that focus people on themselves and on their own works.

One only needs to browse the self-motivational aisle at the bookstore, or read some articles on the internet to find some of these self-actualizing answers. Things like, "Find the person you want to be to be truly happy. Do the things that make you feel good. Or don't let anything or anyone stop you from wealth, success, and happiness. Your amazing destiny where all your dreams come true is out there somewhere, all you have to do is work hard to go get it."

The world's take on being a "saint," although they may call it something different, is entirely focused on ourselves and our own works. Why would you focus on serving someone else, if the goal of life is to make your life the best it can be? No wonder our world functions in the "me-centered" way that it does. But what God is telling us on this All Saints' Day about who a saint is and what a saint does is just as important for us as it was in Luther's day.

Who is a saint? We are all saints because we have been washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. From the newest of saints to the oldest. And what does a saint do? We live our lives of vocation, those good works in the various callings God has given us. Not good works to make us holy. God doesn't need our good works; and we don't need good works, Christ has already made us holy. But someone does need our good works, our love and our service. Our *neighbor* needs them. That's what a saint does. Love their neighbor. Good works are not something extraordinary, either. In fact, good works of the saints look rather ordinary.

A saint is the man who wakes up early every day for years to earn a living for his family. A saint is the mom who's up at 2 a.m. with a crying baby for the 14th night in a row. A saint is a spouse who chooses to do something they would never choose themselves, but does it because it will make their spouse happy. A saint is the child who takes out the trash when it's normally someone else's job. A saint is a grandparent who prays daily for their family. A saint is a neighbor who lends a hand. A saint is a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a mechanic, a construction worker, a paperboy, an engineer, a pastor, a secretary, a business man, a member of the armed forces, a civil servant, and even a retiree, who approaches their day every day with the mindset that they're going to do their job as best they can, and help others while doing it.

Saints are ordinary. And so are our works. But because of Christ's extraordinary love and sacrifice for us, our lives and our vocations have great value. And we anticipate the extraordinary future that awaits all saints as we worship God and the Lamb forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.