

All Saints Day, 11.1.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

“Who are the Saints?”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us in-person and online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

Do you know someone in your life whom you would call “a saint?” Is there someone in your life who has embodied the love, forgiveness and grace of God to you? If we take time to think about it each of us have been blessed through many different people in our lives – people who have been “saints” to us. People who have listened to us, prayed for us, forgiven us, been a peacemakers among us, and even suffered with and for us. Saints look like everyone else, but saints always move and walk in the direction that Jesus walks.

So who are the saints? In today’s gospel, Jesus described the saints in one of the most well known passages in the Bible: the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus called them “*Blessed*,” *makarios* in Greek, which means possessing a “deep joy,” a joy independent of life’s changes and challenges. To be “blessed” and experience deep joy is quite different than ordinary human “happiness.” Happiness is fickle and subject to change. The blessedness Jesus describes comes from staying close to Jesus and imitating Jesus in our lives. To be “blessed” is to experience God at the center of our lives, and to radiate God’s love for others.

Jesus begins by saying “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” Being “poor in spirit” means realizing our complete spiritual poverty and need of God at the center of life. In the midst of a consumer culture, without God at the center of our lives, no amount of material wealth will ever satisfy us. When Christ is our center, we need nothing else.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are those who mourn.*” To be a saint means caring deeply about the sufferings of others, about caring for those that the world does not care for. Sharing in the grief, loss and sufferings of others is how we participate in Christ’s sufferings in the world. As Christ shares our grief and burdens, so we share in the grief and burdens of others.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are the meek.*” The modern word “meek” doesn’t sound like an obvious strength. Jesus means having a humility that knows our own weakness and ignorance. To be meek is to know our need of God’s help. To be meek or humble is one of life’s greatest strengths, because it leads one to seek the help of God in all things. Discipleship begins with following Christ.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.*” How many of us know what it means to be truly hungry? Just as hunger and thirst are longings that can only be satisfied with food and drink - longing for God’s righteousness can only be satisfied by lives of mercy and justice lived for God. As hunger makes us seek food, hunger for God’s righteousness leads us to bear the fruits of faith, works of mercy and justice. Our works are the works of Christ in the world.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are the merciful.*” Mercy is perhaps the most basic action of Jesus in the entire New Testament. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus prayed, “*forgive us our sins as we forgive others.*” To forgive is to be merciful. Jesus told others “*to forgive from the heart,*” and so by example Jesus forgave others from the cross. Another word for mercy is “compassion,” which means to “suffer with” another. Jesus lived with compassion for others, calling us to be his compassionate and merciful hands in the world. Jesus has no hands in the world but ours.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are the pure in heart*” for they will see God. The trouble with our hearts is that they are often a mix of many feelings and divided loyalties. Do we follow God with all our heart? When Jesus says, “*deny yourself and follow me,*” he is asking us to clear our hearts of everything that stands between us and himself. Do we allow Jesus to lead us every day? Our hearts are the pathway of discipleship.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are the peacemakers.*” The Hebrew word for peace, “*shalom,*” means to have healthy relationships with both God and our neighbors. The Greek word for peace, “*eiréné,*” means to bring together or to reconnect what has been separated by division. So peacemakers restore the health of broken relationships, and bring unity to division and separation. As Christ has reconciled us with God, we are called to seek reconciliation amidst the brokenness of the world.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,*” and “*Blessed are those who are falsely accused on my account.*” Jesus makes it clear that the most difficult part of following him is the clash it brings between the world and Christ. It’s very hard for us to imagine the suffering that early Christians endured in choosing to follow Christ and not Caesar. Today, we still struggle with whom we should follow. Should we follow the many voices and institutions of the world that seek the loyalty of our hearts, or should we follow Christ? Today, on All Saints Day, we remember that to be one of the saints means walking in the direction Christ Jesus walks.

When my wife and I served as missionaries in Japan we had a friend named Ruby. Ruby was a member of the church we attended. Ruby was a mother and an educator, and Ruby was also one of the saints who worked tirelessly and compassionately for the homeless of Tokyo, Japan, her

adopted home. With meekness and courage, Ruby embodied the compassion of Christ within church and community, gathering offerings to provide food and other daily necessities for the homeless. Ruby also gathered people to go to the public parks of Tokyo to distribute food and daily necessities to those in need.

When I was with Ruby, I always felt as if I was glimpsing a bit of the kingdom of heaven. After Ruby died from cancer, her funeral in the chapel of the Lutheran seminary in Tokyo was filled to standing room only with people of many different nations and languages. Ruby's compassion and pureness of heart had touched innumerable people. Ruby took care of others because, simply, that is what she felt Christ had called her to do. Ruby would have probably have been embarrassed by my describing her in this way. Yet, in that seminary chapel, filled with people from many different nations and languages, I realized "this is what saints do." Saints share the compassionate love of God; saints are peacemakers among the divisions of society and the nations; saints show mercy in a merciless world.

On All Saints Day, we remember that saints are not "superhuman" or "perfect;" rather, saints, the ones whom Jesus called "blessed," are those individuals who live with God at the center of their lives. Saints are individuals who radiate the love of God outward toward others in compassion, mercy, reconciliation, and even in suffering.

Psalm 34 today reads, "*I sought the Lord, and he... delivered me from all my fears. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.*" The "blessed," the saints, look to the Lord in everything and radiate the strength of God outward to others. Saints are never ashamed because they know the presence of God in their hearts will lead them to do what is right. Saints may fall, they may stumble, they may have moments of weakness, but saints always look to the Lord who strengthens them in everything. Blessed by the presence of God, saints radiate compassion and mercy to others. Our friend Ruby radiated the love of God for the weakest and the most vulnerable – those whom Jesus called "the least of these."

The funny thing about saints is they don't think they are saints. Saints know their weakness and their need of God's grace. Though others are able to see it, such blessedness is often hidden from the saints themselves. Saints radiate God's light and love to others, because God is *already at the center* of their lives.

Every time you step into St. Mark's Lutheran Church, you are treading on hallowed ground. Since 1859, for 161 years, faithful Christians have walked before us with Christ. This congregation

has survived many challenges because of the many saints who have followed the call of Christ. During the Civil War, through two World Wars, the Spanish Flu pandemic, the continued struggle for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s, and today's ongoing struggles for the human rights of many, St. Mark's continues to be a sign of the Christ's compassionate love for all people.

Today, even as we face new challenges, we do not forget the poor, the sick, the suffering, the stranger. We do not forget the ones that Jesus called "the least of these." To live as the body of Christ, the communion of saints, means living into the grace of our baptisms, so that we become the water of life for those who thirst, so that being fed from the Lord's Table, we give ourselves away as bread for the hungry of the world.

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25:31-46), those who were welcomed into the kingdom, the saints, were truly surprised by God's grace. They said in surprise, "*Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?*" Jesus answered them, "*When you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me.*"

The body of Christ, the church, exists to be the visible sign of God's presence in the world. The church exists for nothing else but to transform the world with the grace of God. To be one of the saints, to be "blessed," means living as a blessing for others.

At the end of today's gospel, Jesus says, "*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*" Today we remember all the saints, all the people of God, who have suffered and lived for "the least of these," and who now rejoice in heaven.

Who are the saints? Look around you, the saints are everywhere: humble people seeking to radiate the light of Christ amidst the darkness of the world.

Who are the saints? We are "blessed" when Christ is at the center of our lives. Rejoice and be glad – live with your hearts open to God and with your hands open to the world. Amen.