

11.5.2023 All Saints Sunday

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

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

“Rejoice and be glad”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

All Saints Sunday is a celebration of all the baptized people of God, living and dead, who are the body of Christ, which includes both the church on earth and the church triumphant in heaven.

The text from Revelation appointed for today describes Christ’s church in glory, “*Then [one of the elders] said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’*” These words describe the lives of all Christians who have come out of “the great ordeal” of life and death, having faithfully witnessed to Christ. In addition to the saints who have journeyed before us, we are also included because we have also been washed by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Revelation continues, “*For this reason they are before the throne of God and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*” All Saints Sunday is a moment when we remember the nature of Christ’s body, the church, and the spiritual bond we have between heaven and earth in a church gathered around the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

I invite you look at the stained-glass windows surrounding the high altar with Christ at the center. This window describes the “communion of saints” which we also confess in The Apostles’ Creed. These windows are a visual representation of both the church in heaven and the church on earth with Christ at the center. Today’s text from 1 John describes this, “*What we know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*” This is our hope in Christ – that we will also know his resurrection.

As you look at these windows, please notice the figures at the very bottom who do not yet have halos, they are the saints alive here on earth and they represent each of us. There is a family and there are people of all ages, young and old. These windows offer a vision of the totality of the church, the communion of saints with Christ at the center. It’s a vision to get excited about because it’s a vision that includes all of us.

Today the names we commemorate in the Prayers remember those beloved saints of St. Mark’s

who have died since last All Saints Day, and who are counted among the saints in glory. Notice in the window that these saints have halos, representing their life in glory. Gathered around Christ, they neither hunger nor thirst no more. Christ, the bread of heaven, gives them living water, and God wipes away their tears.

All Saints Day is one of my favorite festivals of the church year because it reminds me that Christ's promises are made to each of us in Holy Baptism, and these promises are forever. Today, in the Eucharist, we celebrate Christ's real presence, surrounded by the saints of every time and place, as Christ offers us the bread of heaven that leads to eternal life.

The gospel for today, known as "The Beatitudes," begins with the well-known words, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" These windows are also a representation of the poor in spirit. Saints do not become saints because they lived perfect lives; rather, saints know their perfect need of God's grace and help. To be poor in spirit is know our utter spiritual and physical poverty before God. To be poor in spirit is to rely upon Christ for all things, knowing that he is the Good Shepherd, always gathering his flock from many nations into one body, the church.

On All Saints Sunday, echoing God's words to Abraham, "your descendants will be as numerous as the stars," we celebrate the great multitude that no one but God can count, who are gathered from every nation. Differences of ethnicity, nation, and social status exist no more because the communion of saints is a vision of one humanity with Christ at the center. It is a vision to live and work for here on earth. In this world of tears and sorrow, a world of war, brokenness, sickness, and death, we mourn those who die, and Jesus at the center, shepherds gathers, and comforts all people.

In this world of sinful brokenness, we hunger and thirst for righteousness – we long for mercy and pureness of heart. Jesus gives us the task of being peacemakers who will be called "*children of God.*" As long as we have the breath of life, we are to work for peace, justice, and an end to war. All Saints Day is not simply a spiritualized vision of heaven, it is our very real struggle and work as Christians to pray and to work for God's will "*here on earth as it is in heaven.*"

When my wife and I lived in Japan, we had a friend named Ruby, who was a member of the international church we attended. Ruby was a living saint who worked among the poor, the homeless and the hungry. Ruby was Asian-American and raised in the United States, yet like me, also lived among her adopted nation. Ruby was a wife, mother, educator, and maker of peace

among all whom she met. She gathered people to bring food to the hungry and homeless in public parks in Tokyo, and tirelessly collected funds to buy food for this work. When I was with Ruby, among the poor and hungry, I always felt as if I was glimpsing heaven. Ruby hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and she was merciful to others. Ruby also knew sorrow, for she had lost a child, and Ruby herself died of cancer. At her funeral, people of many nations, as well as even the hungry and homeless she had befriended, were there. Ruby is counted among the saints in this window.

Who are the saints in your life who have comforted you when you have mourned? Who are the saints who have given you a hunger and thirst for righteousness? Who have been the inspiring peacemakers, and who has shown mercy to you? These are the saints in our lives who continue to urge us on to be living saints for others.

When Jesus says, "*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,*" he is reminding us that saints also know suffering and persecution, because the evil that exists in this world is afraid of living saints. Evil will always seek to dishearten and dispirit the saints when they hunger and thirst for righteousness in this world. Evil will persecute the meek and the merciful because they do not fear evil.

As you look at these windows, remember that you are becoming like Christ. *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.* Live with one foot in heaven trusting in Christ's resurrection and live with one foot firmly here on earth living as Christ for others.

On All Saints Sunday, we remember that because Jesus "died for all" (2 Cor. 5:14ff), no one who believes in him lives alone or dies alone. Christ is with each of us, gathering us into one flock of all nations and peoples.

*Rejoice and be glad!* You are living saints journeying to the kingdom. Live with mercy and live for peace. Use your life so that others will know Christ through you. Amen.