

Sunday, November 5, 2017

All Saints Sunday (Year A)

Revelation 7.9-17; 1 John 3.1-3; Matthew 5.1-12

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This past week we observed a three-day period dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints, martyrs, and all faithful departed believers. The first was Halloween. While having pagan roots as evidenced in our current secular customs, this holiday also has a Christian background. Halloween being a shortening of the proper Christian name for the day, All Hallows' Eve. The eve of All Hallows' Day, or what we now call All Saints' Day, in keeping with the Christian tradition of beginning the celebration of major feast days the evening before.

All Saints' Day (November 1) is specifically for the remembrance of those whom we typically think of as saints, those who have been canonized, or specifically declared a saints, by the Church. These include the likes of St. Gregory the Great, St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, the Blessed Virgin Mary, to name a few. But the remembrance of the dead does not stop there. The Church also celebrates All Souls' Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, on November 2nd. This is the day we remember, as the name indicates, all the faithful departed – all the “regular” folks who have died. We remember our own loved ones who have entered into eternal life.

In more recent times, for purely practical reasons, many churches combine the commemorations of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day into one celebration on the Sunday following – All Saints Sunday. A time to remember all the saints who have gone before – famous and ordinary, known and unknown. And we can do this because in the truest sense, a saint is any faithful person – that is, all believers. In this, we are all considered saints.

Lutheran Pastor Nancy Winder, writing in a reflection on this commemoration, expands the scope of what this day is about. She notes, “All Saints is a wonderful and mysterious day, bringing together past, present, and future.”

This statement initially took me by surprise. Past, yes. After all, the remembrance of all who have died and gone before, by definition, is focused on the past. But present and future? As I reflected on the readings designated for this day, I began to see a complexity that incorporates, even transcends, simple delineations of past, present, and future. Our readings for today seek to convey a richness that is embodied in our annual commemoration of all the saints that have gone before us. At the same time, our readings convey a sense of the future that awaits us all, when we, who even now are saints, are joined to the great cloud of witnesses in the heavenly realm. And our readings also convey a sense of the place the saints, and the character and qualities of the lives they lived, as having a place in our lives here and now. Informing how we are to live into our calling to be saints ourselves.

The first reading from the Revelation to John notes that in the heavenly realm, “there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne” (Rev 7.9). It is further revealed that “These are they

who have come out of the great ordeal” (Rev .14b). Nothing in the description is time-certain. The vast multitude indicates that those gathered themselves span time, including those who are from our past, even our present and our future. This multitude of those who are saved represents all peoples on earth who ever have, or ever will, suffer for their faith. Those who even now experience happiness and release. The great diversity of those gathered reflects God’s intention for the Church – a gathering of all God’s beloved children – past, present, and future.

There is general acceptance that this scene is symbolic of the end of the ages. The future. Even so, the language gives a sense of a present reality. That the heavenly worship is not just a vision of the future – which it is – but is also happening even now. And in the worship and its language, the author seeks to convey to the faithful – both to the multitude gathered and to those of us who look on – a sense of the assurance of God’s ultimate protection for his people. Protection that is promised for the future, but is occurring even now. The scene presented is a vision of God’s ultimate victory over death. And the promise that those who have gone before us already share in that victory. And that we ourselves will share in that victory in the fullness of time.

While Revelation is more future-oriented with cross-over into the present in its language and imagery, our reading from the First Letter of John is more present-oriented with cross-over into the future. Throughout, the author emphasizes God’s desire for us: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God” (1 Jn 3.1a). Assuring us of God’s love and care, not only at some future time, but here and now. And that it is this love, this place in God’s heart that guides what we do even now. As John tells us, “all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 Jn 3.3). Our response, both in our present lives and into the future, is to continually seek to be ones who are set apart by God for God’s purposes. Recognizing that this is our true calling.

But where the rubber really hits the road is in the Gospel reading. Today we heard a section of Matthew’s account of the beatitudes. Through the beatitudes, Jesus provides a unique description of those who are blessed by God, who are in God’s favor. This Gospel is appointed for today because the beatitudes describe a surprising group of people who find their wholeness and fulfillment not in the values of this world, but in living God’s values, which brings ultimate blessing. Saints of the past who have sought to live these values. And saints of today who seek to do likewise.

On this day, we celebrate our connection to saints of every age and generation. Those whose lives exemplify the values of God’s Kingdom as conveyed in the beatitudes. While using future language, a beatitude is a blessing or proclamation of God’s favor both in the future and in the present. A future blessing in terms of a promise as to what awaits those who are faithful to God. And at the same time, a present challenge for us to take on the qualities of Kingdom-living.

So what do these beatitudes have to tell us about saints of the past? And how do they challenge us, the saints of the present age?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5.3). Right off, Jesus calls for blessings on the “poor in spirit.” Matthew is not so much concerned with economic need as with spiritual dependence on God. That we are to come to God with open hearts. Open to receiving his love and grace.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt 5.4). This is more than just being consoled over the loss of loved ones. It is really about having genuine sorrow over the hurt, the suffering, and the wrongs in the present world.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Mt 5.5). The meek represent those who humble themselves before the greatness of God. Those who humble themselves before God will receive the richness of his grace.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt 5.6). Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness desire to see vindication for those who suffer unjustly. Justice will prevail in God’s reign.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Mt 5.7). God’s mercy is freely given to all. Those who receive this mercy are called likewise to extend mercy to others.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5.8). Those who seek God with single-minded devotion in all aspects of their lives will truly experience the fullness of what God has to offer.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt 5.9). Those who seek to bring about peace and particularly reconciliation are specifically called “children of God” because their acts reflect God’s desire for peace and harmony for all his people, in all creation.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Mt 5.10-11). These final blessings are essentially one and the same, declaring God’s favor on those who do, or even might, suffer persecution because of their devotion and loyalty to God. Absolute commitment to God and God’s purposes, even in the midst of one’s own suffering, demonstrates the absolute depth of their faith and hope in what God promises through his Son.

Each of the Beatitudes embodies God’s love and mercy to provide a picture of those who are blessed and are in turn a blessing to others. What Jesus is laying out is a blueprint for a life of holiness and dedication to God. What is laid out illustrates a reversal of the expectations of the world and a living into God’s vision for the world. Proclaiming absolute trust that God will bring – is bringing – about salvation. The ultimate concern of the beatitudes is Jesus’ desire to form a community of disciples, for the purpose of ministry in the here and now. We are that community of disciples, that community of saints.

All Saints is about the past. About remembering the saints who have gone before us. It is about remembering their faithfulness and learning from their example of how they lived that out. All

Saints is about the future. About holding on to the hope and promise of salvation and eternal life through Jesus Christ, whereby we ultimately will be joined with the great cloud of witnesses. But perhaps most important is that All Saints is about the present. About all of who are indeed saints. About us seeking to faithfully live into our own calling as saints, whereby we are blessed and we are a blessing to others.