

Who Are the Saints? Matthew 5:1-12

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

Who are the saints? Is it a football team based in New Orleans? Today the church celebrates All Saints' Day, it is an historic festival of the church year. We have records of its celebration from as far back as the 4th Century. As we are in the "end times", it is good for us to hold up those who have gone before us, who have died in the faith. We *should* remember those who have been examples of the faith to us. We gratefully remember all those who have gone before us. They are examples to those of us who wait for our last day, of what it means to live in the faith.

So, I ask again, "who are the saints?"

As Lutherans, there are many who would say, "We do not believe in saints." What we mean when we say that is, we do not have an understanding of saints as does the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholicism reserves canonization to sainthood only to those who have received the official authorization of the church, and to become canonized in Roman Catholicism as a saint is a lengthy process entailing a thorough investigation into the person's life, especially to see if any miracles might be attributed to the candidate for sainthood. Only if someone is dead, and had performed a miracle are they eligible for sainthood.

So, "who are the saints?" As Lutherans we simply believe as we confess. We confess in the creed our belief in the holy Christian church, the communion of saints. All who have been baptized into the faith **and believe** that they have been justified freely by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus, belong to Christ, and rightly speaking, are His saints.

How does this happen? Whatever sin belonged to us, Christ took upon Himself – and whatever gifts God gave to Christ are now our own possession. Biblically, the word 'saint' means a holy person. God indeed works some marvelous deeds through those who call on His name, but Christians are not holy because of themselves. You and I are holy only so far as we are in Christ – Christ takes our sins into Himself and imparts to us His righteousness, His holiness.

Now that we have stated all this, we must also note that Lutherans have always commemorated the lives of the apostles and other early church figures as saints. We have named our churches in honor of saints – we have two congregations commemorating such saints in our tri-point family, St. Peter and St. John.

On the church calendar, individual saints' days remind us of how God works through His Christians and that He accomplishes more in some of us than He does in the rest of us. Mary the mother of our Lord, Peter, and John have an importance in His church which the rest of us do not have. We are however, equal before God in being justified by His grace through faith, for each of them were sinners in need of God's gift of forgiveness. We are not equal in the abilities and functions and offices God has given us. No one but Mary was chosen to be the Mother of God. Peter made the first bold confession of Christ, John wrote one of the four Gospels, and Peter and John wrote other books in our New Testament.

God chooses who His *great* saints will be, and it is He who makes them such. We may not have the greatness of St. Paul, but God works through each of us to win others for Christ.

So who are saints? Paul, in his letters often addresses his letters to the saints. He wrote, *to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints... To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord*

and ours: To the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Saints are “holy ones,” made holy as they have had their robes washed and made white in the blood of The Lamb – the redeemed of God.

Today, All Saints' Day, is the day in which the church commemorates not one particular person, but all Christians, and especially those who have lived and died in Christ. It is a day in which we look at the church from its eternal aspects. It is a day for us to reflect, if only for a moment, on what it means to be the church – **AND** – to think on life after death.

Today's society sees death as a foreign intrusion. Our last few generations have instead run away from death, and it appears that modern man cannot deal with it. There is the constant search for some cure so that we can get rid of old age and live forever. With modern advances in medicine, many people live long past the age of 70. Death has become remote. St. Paul said that death is the final enemy, the one thing with which all men struggle and by himself, which no man can resolve.

November seems to be the gloomiest time of the year – unless you are a deer hunter. The fall colors are disappearing, and the world stands naked in all of its ugliness until the snows come and blanket the world and give hope of another spring. It is natural that this is the time of year to think of the end of life – and, for Christians, to think of life beyond this life.

This All Saints' Day, we consider Christ's Church. The Christian church is found in many times and many places, but which is not limited or bound by one time or place.

Our congregation may not have thousands or even hundreds gathered, but the church which we confess in our creeds is the total number of all the living and the dead who believe in Christ. It includes those of this congregation and of all Christendom from this and every age – past and present – who live and die in Christ Jesus.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we are not the only ones joining in the festivities. As our preface states, we are surrounded by angels, archangels and all the company of heaven, including the faithful who have gone before us.

Each of our Lutheran congregations has a constitution by which it is run. We have meetings of the members, the elders, various committees, and organizations that run many things. However, the church's true life is not its organization or its administration. The church's true life is hearing the Word of God, the breaking of bread (receiving the sacrament), and prayer. It is when we do these things that heaven and earth come together. Christians who are alive in this place are gathered at Christ's table, and in so doing become one with those who have died and gone before us.

I have only been at a couple funeral services where Holy Communion was celebrated, but the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that it is the way it should be done. It is in the sacrament that the saints in heaven join the saints on earth to form one unity – they are all gathered around Christ who sets the table before all who are members of Christ's body, the church – it is His table here, and His table in heaven, all at one table.

All the saints in heaven are doing the same things which we Christians are now doing: they hear the Word of redemption in Christ and they pray. They pray for us. They pray because they have been freed from this mortal coil and know what they are enjoying – and what we are enduring. To them, nothing is more important than that the world should be converted to Christ and that all God's Christians would remain steadfast in the true faith until the end. That is what they pray in heaven.

We do not, of course, pray to the saints, but the entire company of heaven does pray for us, and with us. Therefore

with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious name, evermore praising Thee and saying, "Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

My friends, today, All Saints' Day, gives us the opportunity to think of the church as embracing all believers – saints on earth and saints in heaven. But, if our prayers have any value, if the prayers of the saints have any worth before God, it is not because of our merits, nor of the merits of any who have died in the faith before us. Instead, our prayers have merit before God because of the merits of Christ.

Christ and His Holy Spirit offer up prayers to God which are so perfect that they surpass anything we can imagine. As a Christian I treasure the prayers of all saints – I treasure your prayers, and the prayers of others here upon earth and those in heaven. But, as a Christian, for miracles and help, and more importantly, for my eternal salvation, I rely on solely upon Jesus Christ who has died to make me holy, to make us His beloved saints. Amen.