

## The Festival of All Saints

Revelation 21:1-4

A Sermon for the Season of Pentecost

We are in a festival season. Last week was the Festival of the Reformation. Today is the Festival of All Saints. In three weeks, we will celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year.

In reflecting on this Festival of All Saints, there are three clarifications that need to be brought in front of us.

First, what does it mean to be a saint? A church-going Lutheran asked her pastor: "How can I celebrate All Saint's Day? I'm not a saint. I'm not a good person."

At funerals people will often say about the one who died: "He was such a good person." Or: "She was like a saint." Then it's all fine.

Of course, that is not the Christian faith. Remember that in the New Testament we have two books written by Paul to the Christians in Corinth, First and Second Corinthians.

What we forget is that Corinth was a cesspool. These were not your normal, upstanding citizens Paul was writing to. This was a church with people who had a lot of problems, like Corinth itself.

And yet Paul called these people in Corinth "saints." How come? Because being a saint is not a matter of being good.

Doesn't it matter being a Christian? Luther once said that the one virtue you can talk about as a Christian is humility, being humble. You may remember in the novel *David Copperfield*, there's someone named Uriah Heep, and he goes around ringing his hands, saying: "I'm so 'umble. I'm the 'umblest person," all the while scheming to lord it over you. As the story goes, he's not only not humble, he's greedy and domineering.

The real problem with the virtue "humility" is that the person who really has it, doesn't know it. Once you think you've got it, you've lost it.

What does it mean to be a saint? We know that Luther often lifted up Isaiah 64:6: "All our righteous deeds are filthy rags." When we hear that, we nod in approval. How wise. How true. But what really happens is that our Eyes Glaze Over. We call that an "EGO" moment, because in our heart of hearts we think: "Of course, the bad things I do are filthy rages, not the good things, not my righteous needs!" Deeply embedded in us – like a second nature – is a trust in works. But being a saint is not about good works.

It's also true the evil one is very sneaky. He sneaks into our minds with thoughts of goodness and doing good things because that's another religion. In that way he leads us away from what being a Christian, a saint, is really about.

The religion that is the religion of Paul and Christianity says being a Christian is about the cross alone. A saint is someone claimed by him, marked with the cross of Christ forever. Whenever being a saint has to do with good works that we do, we have diminished the cross. That then is a different religion.

Who are saints? Saints, then, are those who are forgiven sinners. That's the first clarification.

The second clarification is about the question: Will my dog go to heaven?

We can understand that concern, yet, we need to get back to the basic understanding of who we are before our Lord, Jesus Christ. People will mistakenly say that what's different about human beings compared to animals is that we have souls, and they don't.

People think this because they get confused about what it says in Genesis, and how this was translated in the King James Version long ago. In Gen 2:7 it says God took the dust and created Adam and in the KJV, it says: "He became a living soul" (really a mistranslation). It goes on in Genesis 2:19 where the Lord makes the animals, and they are described with the same Hebrew word! (In the RSV the Hebrew is translated in both places as "living creatures.") Thus, what distinguishes human beings from other animals is not the matter of "soulness," whatever that might be.

As you know, studies of higher animals such as apes, show how little difference there is between us and them. Just a few chromosomes.

What's the real difference? Where's the difference? The difference is something entirely different, and that is has to do with what the Lord has done in Jesus Christ. He became a human being and chose us, elected us, and that's the difference, not some other kinds of things.

Well then, what about my dog? Will my dog go to heaven?

Here then we come to what it means to be a body. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul distinguishes between a physical body and a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44). It says we are still a body after we're in the next life. Body has to do with the sum of our relationships.

Moreover, there's going to be a lot to do in heaven. Not what we call work and drudgery, but meaningful things to do. There was a professor of Hebrew at Drew University who talked about the fact that he would spend the first thousand years reading the Talmud, which is fifty volumes in Hebrew, because there are other thousands of years to do other things he'd like to do.

We can help ourselves by recalling some basic points in the New Testament. There is this marvelous place in 1 Corinthians 2:9 which says: “. . . no eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

And Ephesians 3:20: “. . . [He is able to do] exceedingly, abundantly beyond all that we can ask or think.”

And Luke 6:38: “. . . good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap . . . .”

The Lord's new creation, like the resurrection itself, is beyond our expectations and imaginations. Our problem is that we can't imagine perfection that isn't static, when, as a matter of fact, eternal life is a new heaven and earth, teeming with life and activity, only more and better than all we can imagine.

That's clarification number 2.

The third clarification has to do with the difference between Memorial Day and All Saints Day. Although for many, Memorial Day, has become a long weekend off of work, some of us celebrate it quite seriously. Memorial Day, which started after the Civil War, has to do with honoring those who died in war.

The Festival of All Saints is something entirely different. To be sure, All Saints Day is not one of the major festivals. It goes along with Epiphany, the Ascension, and other festivals that we don't pay much attention to really.

But All Saints Day has to do, after all, with the Resurrection. It has to do with the victory, the celebration, the celebration of those who are in the Lord. It is summed up by John 11:25-26a: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever believes in me shall never die." Basically, that very complicated pair of verses about this hope we have in Christ Jesus.

People then ask: What's it like? How is it going to happen? You can tell already in the New Testament they are discussing this question of where are the people who have already died? In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, Paul is speaking to this question, and he says (paraphrase): "Those who have died, those who are asleep in Christ, shall arise first, and then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them." He says this even more specifically in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 where he writes:

"Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

We can of make the mistake of thinking this is all sort of flimsy. What is it? Nothing? The New Testament has three ways of describing this.

First of all, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 it talks about Lazarus being on Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:23). It's a kind of metaphor. But when dealing with parables, as we often say, it's a mistake to interpret individual elements in a parable as symbols of other things because most of the time the point of a parable is found in the last verse. So this image of Lazarus on Abraham's bosom doesn't tell us much.

In Revelation 6:9, it says the saints are "under the altar." Again, this is kind of a picture. This also doesn't tell us too much.

Paul consistently talks about those who in the Lord are asleep in Christ. But basically, we have to remember that for those who are in the Lord, time no longer has anything to do with it. "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," everything is changed.

We ask: "What then do we say?" There are some famous places in Isaiah 11:3-8 to lift up:

"The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain . . . .

Again in Isaiah 65:25-26: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox . . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

As the ancient Hebrews thought about this, they thought as it was in the beginning before the fall, so it would also be at the end. There would be no more "nature red in tooth and claw" as Tennyson describes it. There would be no hurt and no destruction.

But there is something more in the New Testament. As you know, in many congregations, a young person or an adult reads one or more of the Scripture lessons for the day. This was the case in a particular congregation. One All Saints Sunday a young boy was the reader, and the lesson was from Revelation 21. But he was unfamiliar with the word "Revelation," and he announced instead: "The Scripture reading for today is from Revolution 21." It is a revolution! It is not simply restoring at the end what was at the beginning. It's much more. It's a revolution.

As Revelation 21:1-4 says:

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . . and behold the Lord will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

What we then celebrate here on All Saints Day is something far different from Memorial Day. We celebrate that the church militant, that's who we are here, the church on earth,

and the church triumphant, are all one. There is one body of Christ, and we who are in him are in union with all other saints in heaven and earth.

How does this happen? First, of all it happens in Baptism. In Romans 6:5 it says: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Paul is talking there about Baptism.

As we go on to consider what this is about, we think of the Lord's Supper, this banquet. The New Testament describes again and again that being in the Lord is like a wedding banquet. In communion we have a foretaste of the feast to come. We and those who have died ahead of us are in communion with him and each other. We share in this same banquet. We have the reality, the assurance, and the certainty of this because he does it, and it doesn't depend on us. He has finished his work on the cross (John 19:30), and he continues then to keep us in communion with him now and forever.

Amen