

All Saints' Sunday, Year A
November 5, 2023
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC

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

Who is a saint? Up until about the year 300 (in 313 Constantine legalized Christianity), a person had to be martyred in order for the church to consider the person a saint. A martyr is a person killed for his/her belief in Jesus Christ. However, as early as the development of the Apostles' Creed, which is ancient, many Christians take an expansive view of sainthood and express our belief in "the communion of saints." Paul addresses almost all of his letters to "the saints." According to Paul, a saint is someone who is "sanctified in Christ Jesus." This describes all who believe in Christ and are made holy by his grace. Also included in Paul's view are "all that ... call upon the name of Jesus Christ," whether or not someone had yet converted to Christianity. There are references to saints in the Old Testament, too. Psalm 50:5 defines saints as "those that have made a covenant with [the Lord] by sacrifice." In other words, the saints are persons who are identified as God's people. That, my friends, as our opening hymn reminds us, is all of us.

I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true. ...

Verse 3

They lived not only in ages past;

there are hundreds of thousands still;

the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,

in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;

***for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.***

A hymn is not the doctrine of the church, but this hymn reminds us that there is something very special about people who love, and live their lives in such a way as to do Jesus' will. We are reminded of our baptism, in which, in the prayer book we say:

we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Then, as a gathered community we **welcome** the newly baptized

"into the household of God, to confess the faith ... and to share in [Christ's] eternal priesthood (BCP 308)."

Through baptism, we are transformed. Through baptism, Jesus has turned our lives **upside down**. Sharing in Christ's eternal priesthood points us to our radical proclamation of *eternal* life. Christ destroying death means that those who have died, live. They live in "the nearer presence of God," see God fully, and we are connected through memory, faith, and love. When we commend those we love to God's care we proclaim that God's kingdom is not some faraway, unattainable place but God's kingdom that has broken into this this world. Jesus' resurrection broke our separation from God. We just joined with Christ in his death and resurrection. This reality is why we say "alleluia" at the graveside. We are practicing the Easter promise, that love rules the day. God's love transcends our human experience.

Our belief in this radical, eternal love from God is *upside down* to the values of the world. "The world" wants us to believe that we can have, touch, hoard, buy, sell and **control** everything that there is – and that that

“everything” is all there is. No! We participate in this upside downness especially on All Saints’ Day. We honor all the saints, past and present, those we see and those we long to see again. This is a holy, unearthly proclamation in and to the world. Amen (so be it).

In *that* reality, we look at Jesus’ words to the disciples. We hear just a portion of Jesus’ sermon today. The sections that follow (after verse 12) inform us how to live out this part we call The Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. In Luke there are four beatitudes; Matthew added four more onto Luke’s writings so in Matthew we have eight. Matthew’s is the sermon on the mountain; Luke’s is the sermon on the plain. That is the basics.

Jesus says,

Blesséd are you ...

Blessed are you; the Greek word is *makario*, and it is a word with a close translation to happy, blessed or fortunate. *Makario* is something that God does, declares for us. Hold onto that for a minute. It is very tempting to think of the Beatitudes as a list of behaviors: do these things and that gives you some special happiness in your life. Does that make sense? Not really. Are you happy when you mourn? Or are poor – whether in wealth or in spirit? However: turn these things *upside down* in light of life in Christ.

We mourn because of a loss; we mourn over a loved one’s death. We mourn over the ways in which our actions separate us from God. The upside down part of mourning is that in the kingdom of God, those who mourn are not pitied but comforted. Comforted not in the world because “the world” says “this is all there is.” We are comforted because Jesus says that death does not have the final say.

How about poor? Saying that people are blessed because they are poor can lead us down a path of romanticizing poverty. “We went on a mission trip and the people had no shoes or water or access to life-giving things ... but they were so happy!” Poverty does not cause “happy.” Again, turn it upside down: imagine that there is an answer when we are poor in spirit. The poverty of the world and in our hearts will not destroy us because God is with us. God alone makes us rich. That is not what the world says, right? You must have more, more, more and you must have it now or you are worthless. God says “I love you always; I will be with you to the end of the age.” In Christ we have everything.

Okay, the checklist. The words are in the indicative tense. They are not imperatives, commands, but statements of our being. Blessed is our **nature** because of our belief in Jesus Christ. We are changed by coming together *in Christ* in the church. We are far from perfect – look at the people in the bible that we call saints, but Jesus changes us. Christ in the center of our lives fundamentally changes who we are. Blessed, happy is not something we have done, but something that has been done in Christ Jesus for us. This passage is about our given characteristics, our way of being in the world, in this kingdom that God has initiated. It is upside down – and life-giving, even happy because we are saints in God.

The beatitudes do not end with the little bit that we heard today. Jesus’ sermon continues through Matthew 7.28. We who are salt and light to the world – we who are life-giving to the world – are called to do something with the change that Jesus makes in us. This is how the world is when we honor God. We are blessed, and we supposed to do something with that reality. The rest of chapter 5, then chapters 6 and 7 give us the detail of how we live when we are changed. We are already changed. Now do something, Jesus says. And here’s how to pray. (The Lord’s Prayer is part of the sermon.) By the way: chapter 7.12: ‘In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Did you know that what we call “the golden rule” is from the bible?) In the concluding verses, Jesus tells us that there is a way of living that brings life, and a way that brings death. Choose life, Jesus says! Choose life.

One of the things that we can do when we are blessed and transformed is have hard conversations. We know – we experience it daily – that the world is not good at having hard conversations. The church is a place where we can learn how to do have hard conversations and to practice doing that. The vestry practiced having hard conversations. I invite you to come to vestry, come to my office, come to others meetings, gatherings, and practice.

Another challenge in living in this world is our own illiteracy about the beliefs of other faiths. We begin with the history of the church, the one church called Christianity, into which Jews and Gentiles came. That itself was no small argument. A huge, early split among the apostles was about whether or not you had to be Jewish before you became a Christian. Yes! Read the book of Acts with some friends. Come to Christian Formation... we are all still learning. I offer another place to learn, and I invite you not only to come, but also to help present the material. On a day and time other than Sunday morning – tell me when you will come – let's take a look at an overview of other faiths. We know that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called the Abrahamic faiths. They all came from the genealogy of Abraham's family. But what's after that? When, how ... and what do people in these faiths believe? There are several good resources for us to study. Then, from this foundation, there is a book called *"My Neighbor's Faith,"* and it walks us through real scenarios of resolving conflicts as individuals with people of other faiths. I would love to learn these things with you. Let me know when and we'll dive in.

Back to our characteristic of being blessed, happy, different in that way from "the world." We may not feel happy just because Jesus tells us that we are. You know what? You are special, loved, and worthy of every blessing of God. There is a song based on Psalm 51 that I sing/pray often: "Create in me, a clean heart oh God, and I shall be renewed." That heart is in you. God loves you that much. Allow yourself to be renewed. Imagine being in the world that is also the kingdom of God. This world needs you, your spirit, your renewed heart so that we/others might experience God's kingdom. No matter what your circumstances or situation, no matter what the world may say about you or what **you** may say about you, you are a beloved member of the household of God. Rest in that love and that blessing.

We are linked with all the saints who have gone before us. This world cannot break that connection because this world is not what rules our lives; our life in Christ does. We remember, today especially, that one day we, too, will join with all of our loved ones, all the saints, at the throne of our Lord and our God. We will hunger no more, and thirst no more. We will forever be in the shelter of our God and of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We will sing, "Amen! So be it! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Alleluia.