

All Saints Sunday – From Every Tribe

All Saints Day is observed on November 1, after All Hallows Eve. But most of us celebrate it on the first Sunday in November. We chose the texts assigned to All Saints Day rather than those assigned to this Sunday, the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost. This observance is worth taking the time in worship to give thanks and honor the saints of the church.

[The founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, loved All Saints Day.](#) So, we suggest you take this day and let it stand alone as a celebration of the church that was, the church that is, and the church that will be.

You have traditions, no doubt, with which you observe this day. There are those from among you who need to be acknowledged, to be remembered. And yes, there is grief in the recognition of death, but there is also joy in the promise of eternity and the gratitude for the legacy that remains. On this day, we proclaim that we are who we are because of those who have gone before. But we also give thanks for the saints who are still with us; today is a celebration of the life and ministry of the church. We also hold out hope for the vision of the church to be, the church of every nation, all tribes and peoples. It is a celebration of community.

November 05, 2023

[Revelation 7:9-17](#); [Matthew 5:1-12](#); [1 John 3:1-3](#)

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PLANNING NOTES

All Saints Sunday can be a glorious celebration of the body of Christ in your local context. There is no church like yours, no collection of gifts and graces, no accumulation of wisdom and experience, no place of joy and sorrow exactly like your congregation. This is a time to celebrate who you are in Christ.

Certainly, a major part of the worship experience is the remembrance of those who died in the past year. Some way of naming is important. Pictures, if they are available, can be displayed. Stories can be told, and families and legacies honored. There can also be an opportunity for remembering those who may have been gone longer than a year as a way of giving thanks for their contributions to the church that you are continually becoming. In so doing, you are not only recognizing and celebrating the church that was, but you are also acknowledging and giving thanks for the church you are and are becoming.

You can, on this All Saints Sunday, say thank you to the saints sitting in the pews, the ones teaching in the Sunday school or preparing the meals or snacks for after church. This is a wonderful day to thank those who have gone before and those who continue to labor in the fields of the Lord.

The other encouragement we want to give for your worship today comes from a phrase in Revelation 7:9: "From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." Today is a great day for recognizing the multicolored, multiethnic, multinational nature of the church of Jesus Christ. There is diversity of various kinds in our local congregations, but the diversity enlarges when we remember that there are brothers and sisters around the world who are part of the body that gives us our identity and our hope. We celebrate the church we may never see but with whom we worship week after week. Today, we acknowledge the glory of a worldwide church.

PREACHING NOTES

The “this” with which the text from Revelation for All Saint’s Day begins is the numbering of the saved (or the “sealed”) from the twelve tribes of Israel (*Rev. 7:1-8*)—the one hundred forty-four thousand that you might have heard referred to a time or two before. In fact, I have heard some say that there are only 144,000 in heaven. That is why you must pay attention and make sure you have your number! Those folks obviously stopped reading before verse nine of chapter seven: “A great multitude no one could count” seems pretty inclusive.

Then we have the question from the elder. “Who are these?” Did he not know? Was it a device to test John? Or was it just a way of starting a conversation? “Who are these?” It turns out they are those who have found their way into the kingdom. Isn’t it fascinating that they are described as people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages? What a celebration for this All Saints Sunday—that the body of Christ looks like us, but us as we could be! Not like the church as it often appears today, but the church that represents the beloved community, that celebrates diversity of every kind, that reflects the tapestry of the world in which we live. What an amazing picture and a powerful hope. This is the church that makes it into the kingdom; this is the church that stands before the throne. The church as it is in total, not just the divided pieces of it that we see.

Getting there wasn’t easy, however. There was a lot to overcome, a lot of prejudice and injustice to face to be this church, to represent this ideal. No, it wasn’t a walk in the park. It took some doing, some effort, some struggle on their part. On our part.

The elder, when he, at last, recognizes them or checks the program or reveals what he knew all along, says that this multitude has come through a great ordeal. Older versions called it the tribulation. Some say the ordeal points to a specific event having to do with the end times—the last battle or the suffering that comes along with it. Others say, and I tend to believe it, that it is the ordeal of living in uncertain times. Maybe it is something cataclysmic and world-encompassing, or maybe it concerns the ordeals we read about in our newspapers or see listed in our prayer chains—ordeals of illness or infirmity, ordeals of abuse or victimization, ordeals of hunger and poverty, ordeals of ... well, you fill in the blank. There are so many ordeals, so many struggles, large and small, out there in the world. So, it may be the sum of all of them that adds up to the great ordeal that the elder speaks of in verse fourteen.

“But wait,” you say, “it has to be more than just survival; more than just getting through whatever the struggles are.” And you would be right. They came through, the elder tells us, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That is one little indicator that you can’t take this literally! Washing robes in blood won’t make them white. So, what does it mean?

Blood, in the Bible, usually means life, sometimes a life of sacrifice. This multitude, then, are the ones who put on the life of the Lamb. St. Paul is always telling us to put on our faith, to put on the attributes of Christ, to put on the fruit of the Spirit. These are the ones who put on Christ—put on his life, lived it as though it were their own; lived it in front of any and all, particularly those in need. These are the ones who lived and worked for the benefit of others.

These are the ones who cared for you and loved you. On All Saints Day, that is who we remember—those who loved and cared, and now are no longer here to do so. They have left a hole in our midst;

they have left tasks for others to do. They have given an example that someone has to pick up. They have left caring that others need to do.

In other words, it is our time in the laundry room. We wash our robes in the blood, in the life and witness and example of the Lamb, and then we put it on and begin to look like him. And act as he did. And love as he did. Who are these? They are those we remember. And they are us.

Us? Yes, we are part of the saints we celebrate today. At least, that is what those verses from I John are saying. By the love of God, we are called children, children who are like him, children who are purifying themselves, children who are the saints of God. All of us, not just the special ones, not just the departed ones. All of us who have claimed this faith and who stand in this hope.

But what does that look like? What do we look like as the saints of the church? Jesus told us. It is how he began the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. "Blessed are you..." Someone said that in all the furor to post the Ten Commandments in courthouses and on city lawns, that perhaps what ought to be posted in our courts of law would be the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the merciful" might read differently on the wall of a criminal court, don't you think? But then, we couldn't do that, some would argue, that would simply be impractical. It wouldn't fit in that place; that is a place of law, not grace.

And that is just the problem with the Beatitudes. They aren't really practical. Some argue they are impossible. How in the world are we supposed to live up to that kind of standard? It is not within us to capture all these elements, no matter how great our desire. So, do the Beatitudes function like the law? Do they simply show us how far short we fall from what we are supposed to be? Do they layer guilt upon guilt on us so that we turn in utter despair to the Savior, confessing our complete worthlessness?

That is how some have presented these verses—a measuring rod for entrance into the kingdom of God. But if that is true, why did Jesus introduce each verse with the word "blessed"? Actually, the word is *Makaríoi* (*makarioi*), which can also be translated as "happy." You've seen that before. Happy are those who... It could even be translated as "blissful." It doesn't seem to me that Jesus would set us up for layers of guilt and then use the word "blissful" to describe the condition we can't reach.

So, maybe these aren't laws. Maybe the Beatitudes are something other than a challenge to better living, or - as some have presented them - a psychology of happiness. Maybe they are something more.

What if Jesus began his teaching ministry with a word of encouragement instead of an impossible standard to attain? In the previous chapter of Matthew's Gospel, before the Sermon on the Mount begins, an amazing number of events transpire. Chapter four begins with the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus declares the kind of Messiah he intends to be - to himself, to God, to Satan, to all of us. Then he returns and calls together the community of followers within which he will work his earthly ministry. Finally, he teaches and heals and draws increasingly larger crowds. And then chapter five lets us know his teaching. But in between the wilderness and the calling of the disciples, he makes this statement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). And "repent" in this case isn't "shame on you," but "get on board, turn around and follow me."

What if the Beatitudes were a snapshot of the community of faith instead of a measuring rod? What if Jesus was saying, "Blessed is the community that includes the peacemakers"? Blessed is the community that makes room for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for those poor in spirit. Blessed is the community that finds space for those who mourn over the brokenness of the world,

for those who are unstained by the impurity of the world. Blessed is the community that knows persecution is inevitable and still decides to make room for those the world thinks are unimportant.

Jesus was getting out the albums and inviting us to look again to see who we are, see what is among us. He was opening those folders we had forgotten and showing us our true selves. Certainly, there is a call here as well; I'm not dismissing that. But it is not an impossible call because it is already among us in the community of faith. We learn from one another because we are gifted or blessed in different ways.

So, take a look at the snapshot of the community of faith. You might be surprised how blessed you are. Today, we celebrate not just those we miss, those who died since the last All Saints celebration, but we celebrate what they taught us and what they showed us. Today, we celebrate how the community was enriched by their presence, as it is enriched by those who are still here with us.