The Festival of All Saints

6 November, Anno Domini 2016

St. Matthew 5:1-12

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Festival of All Saints is a wonderful opportunity for us, not to worship the saints or look to them for help, but to understand who they are, what really makes a saint. So I looked up the word “saint” to see how the dictionary defined it. Not surprisingly, they didn’t bother seeing how Christ defined it. Merriam-Webster had the following definition as its very first: “a person who is officially recognized by the Christian church as being very holy because of the way he or she lived.” Admittedly, that’s probably how most people are used to thinking of saints –someone who is better than us and has some kind of special in with God because they worked hard to avoid sin and live “holier” lives.

The word “saint” actually comes from the Latin *sanctus*, which means “holy”. Does that word, *sanctus*, ring a bell? We sing it every week right before we pray the Lord’s Prayer. “Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth.” Joining with the seraphim bowing heads and hearts we humble ourselves before the throne of God and before the Lamb who comes in His Body and Blood in the Name of the Lord and declare **Him** to be holy. Now when it comes to defining the word “holy”, Merriam-Webster does a little better. It defines “holy” as “exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness.” Now we’re getting somewhere. We worship the **Holy** Trinity – the only exalted God, the only God worthy of complete devotion, the only God who is perfect in goodness and righteousness. Holy is certainly a great word to describe Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But what about the saints? Can we say the same thing about them? Not exactly but we can say they are holy.

Where we run into trouble is in how we understand a saint to be holy. Are Mary, Peter, David, and Matthew morally superior to us? Is their eternal life their reward for being such upstanding and pious individuals? Did God look down from heaven and say “Now there’s a winner! I want that Paul on my team. He must have been taking notes when I said ‘Blessed are the meek’. Look at just how meek he is! That man is a saint.” We might at first think that until we actually read Scripture and learn a thing or two about these so-called saints. Mary and Joseph left Jesus behind in Jerusalem and then had the nerve to blame Him for their poor parenting. Peter, well, mighty Peter turned tail and abandoned Jesus in His darkest hour and then denied even knowing Jesus. David committed adultery by lusting after another man’s wife, got her pregnant and then had the poor man murdered in order to cover up his own sin. Matthew was counted among the lowest of the low because he robbed his own people in order to get in good with the Romans and build up his retirement account. How about Paul? Surely Paul earned the title of saint by his bold and fearless preaching of the Gospel under intense persecution. But let’s not forget that before Paul was converted he hated Jesus, and hated those who believed in Jesus so deeply that he tirelessly worked to imprison them or have them killed, such as Stephen. When we take an honest look at the saints, they begin to glimmer and shine a little less brightly. Suddenly, they begin to look like, you got it, sinners. And they were. They were just as guilty of sin, struggled just as deeply as you and I do against temptation, and often fell into the snares of the devil.

And yet they are saints, along with the innumerable multitude from every tribe and people and language that St. John saw standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb. They are all saints because they confessed that they were not. None of them ever sang “Holy, holy, holy, ME! Heaven and earth are full of MY glory. Blessed and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to MEEEE!” They are saints because like the multitude their robes had been **made** white. They all stood before God in tattered, worn out, sin-soaked rags. They confessed their own sinfulness and unholiness. They acknowledged the evil that lurked deep in the darkness of their sinful hearts. They knew the only answer wasn’t being better, but being forgiven. They didn’t live under the delusion that they could just one day choose to believe in God. That would mean that they could also just one day choose to stop sinning. In fact, Paul claimed for himself the title chief of sinners. All together they stood before the God of heaven and earth claiming no merit or worthiness, finding no comfort or value in their works or their decisions. They approached God as beggars – crying out “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And God, the Father Almighty, did exactly that. He had mercy on them. 100% unearned, undeserved mercy. In that mercy the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to offer up His sinless, spotless life as a ransom for the sin of every man, woman, and child – for you. The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world willingly bore the punishment that Mary, Peter, David, Matthew, Paul and the great multitude deserved because of their disobedience and unbelief. The Holy One of God became the most unholy and wretched of sinners so that all who believe in Him, all who take refuge under the arms that were stretched out on the beams of the cross would be made holy. The blood and water that came flowing out of His pierced side flow in a never ending stream into the waters of Holy Baptism. And in those quiet waters Jesus makes sinners holy, washing away of all their sins, cleansing them forever of everything that made them unholy. Jesus pours out His holiness, His saintliness and makes it yours.

Are you baptized? You are a saint. You are holy. You are one of the blessed. In one of the most beautiful mysteries, the ONLY One who is holy freely bestows His holiness on us who in our thoughts, our words, and our actions are anything but holy. What makes a saint? The Blood of Jesus, Blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross and is poured out from the cup to satisfy those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for mercy, and for peace. “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” They are saints, real saints, sinners who have washed their robes clean in the Blood of the Lamb, the same Blood that was shed to forgive you. They are men, women, and children of every nation, every people, and every language. They are the great multitude of those who have fallen asleep in Christ and now from their labors rest – some whose names the world knows quite well and others who were known only to their families. Some walked with our Lord. Some were blessed to be reviled and persecuted and martyred on account of Jesus. Some were faithful husbands and fathers. Some were humble and God-fearing mothers who quietly and humbly changed their children’s diapers and made them their dinner. Some were doctors, farmers, and secretaries. Some were only a few hours old. Some still are.

You see, the saints in heaven aren’t the only saints. They are the part of the one, holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church that is blessed to see with their eyes what we, the part of Church that still struggles through the great tribulation, long for and cling to by faith. Their warfare is ended. Ours continues. But even though we must still for a time endure the weakness of our flesh, the shadow of death that hangs over this mortal life, the evil things that the world says about those who confess Jesus, we are still blessed. The kingdom of heaven is ours – God’s kingdom of grace and mercy. We are surrounded by the faithful cloud of witnesses. And here, around this altar, week after week, for one glorious hour, the separation between the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant fades – angels and archangels, the saints in heaven and the saints on earth, our loved ones who have closed their eyes in faith, all stand together as one great multitude that no one can number. And together we lift our voices as one victorious army, clothed in white robes, waving the palm branches of victory, crying out in unison “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! Blessed is He, blessed is He, blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord! Amen! Amen! Amen!”

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.