**Revelation 7:9-17 November 7, 2021 (Observance of All Saints’ Day)**

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

Our text for this morning comes from Revelation chapter 7 here re-reading these words. “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As a family gathers together at the funeral of a loved one it’s a regular occurrence that the surviving members of the family share memories and stories. As they look over pictures and see slide shows or old videos they remember the great times they had with the person who has passed away. Many times at these sorts of occasions, and even in the funeral service someone may talk about something that this person had done, or put up with their entire life and say, “That person was a saint.” It’s phrased usually in such a way as “Anyone who could put up with them was a saint.” Or “Anyone who worked in that profession is a saint.” Usually it’s the actions of the person that gives them their “sainthood” which shouldn’t be that much of a surprise. We usually attribute someone being a “saint” based on the definition of the Roman Catholic Church that takes specific champions of holiness and makes them saints. Peter was a saint because of his faithfulness, Mary was a saint because of what she accomplished in being the mother of Jesus Christ. Early popes and religious leaders were saints because they pushed the Church forward and were examples of holy living in what they said, did and wrote. In our own lives as Lutherans Martin Luther would be our very own Saint due to the work that we touched on and observed last week in the Reformation. The really special and important people are saints. The ones who did the big stuff, the ones that churches are named after, or even in your own life you think of the very best of the best. Those are the ones that are saints. Or so we think. Which begs the question to us today, as we gather for “All Saints’ Day” who exactly are the saints? Are saints only those who have gone before us? Who lived lives that we would consider noteworthy, special, and holy? Or would we ever stop to think that today is really about us? That we are the saints that should be celebrated, recognized, and remembered even as we are still living and breathing today?

From our lessons in Scripture we have a few examples of who the saints could be. In Revelation 7 we see the multitude that no one could number, from every nation, tribe, peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes shouting praises to God. In 1 John we hear that those who hope in Christ purifies themselves, or makes themselves holy, as He is pure. Even in the well-known Beatitudes of Matthew 5 we hear about those who are blessed because they are poor in spirit, because they mourn, because they are meek and they hunger and thirst for righteousness. Even those who are blessed because they are merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. Now those sound like some of the actions that we would identify as someone who is a saint! Someone who is merciful, and kind to those who are less fortunate, who go out of their way to give of themselves without expecting anything in return. Those who are pure in heart, who refrain from sinning, who stay away from temptations and addictions, who refrain from using foul language or hurting anyone else. And those who are peacemakers, who don’t start confrontations but are called in to stop them. Who are the first one on the scene to diffuse tension, who help build bridges rather than destroy them.

Perhaps that’s why we always focus on our loved ones who pass away, because in their absence we usually remember the times when they behaved as we believe the saints do. It’s commonplace that after someone passes away we remember the good times rather than the bad. Even in society when a celebrity or public figure passes away we usually hear about the good things they had done or the memorable moments of their career rather than hearing about the way they died or the bad things that they had done. We like to remember them at their best, rather than see them at their worst. Which is why when we observe All Saints’ Day we think of the saints who are gone because we always look back on them in a positive light, we remember the good, we focus on them rather than ourselves, we point to their holiness rather than our own.

Because in ourselves we see the times we have been unfaithful. When we have been evil, when we have hungered and thirsted for everything except the righteousness of God. We see the times when we have shown violence, frustration, and anger rather than mercy to those around us who come to us for help. When we have been tainted and stained with the evil intentions of our own hearts rather than showing off the purity within us. And even the times when we have started wars with those around us instead of bringing about peace. In the saints of old we see their faithfulness, and even in the lives of our loved ones we remember the wonderful times, but in the teaching of God’s Law and when we examine the actions of our own lives with honesty, when we are confronted with the reality of our sin, we don’t see purity and holiness, instead we see only the truth of our own evil hearts. Because while we can show off a certain side of ourselves to the world, we can’t hide our actions from God. While we live in a world of social media, where we have complete control over how we are seen and perceived, where we can delete the e-mails and messages we don’t like, where we can hide the posts that we don’t want to read or hear, even where we can delete the pictures that we think shows us in an unflattering way that we don’t want to be shown, we can’t hide from God. We can’t hide from ourselves. Our imperfection remains. Our sin can’t be atoned for by our own actions, no matter how much we focus or emphasize on the good things we do. For all of our works outside of Christ are filthy rags. Everything that we do to earn our salvation is meaningless. We can’t make ourselves holy, we can’t become saints on our own. Instead we remain the sinners we know deep down in our hearts that we are.

But even though we can’t make ourselves holy, or make ourselves saints, that’s exactly what we are. Because in the proper definition of a saint, we see what Christ has done for us. A saint is defined as someone who is holy. Now we on our own aren’t holy, we were born into this world unholy and enemies of God. We can’t possibly achieve a state of holiness based on what we do, but it is God in His love, and the work of His Son Jesus Christ who makes us holy. Who washes us clean of the sin and defilement of our hearts and clothes us in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism. (A truth that you got to see this very morning as Katrina joined God’s family and was washed clean before your very eyes of sin. It wasn’t her actions that brought faith into her heart but it was the work of the Holy Spirit and now she is holy because God has made her holy.) Hear again these words of the elder in Revelation who explains exactly who this host is that is praising God, this amazing gathering of the saints in heaven who give praise and honor and worship to the Lamb. “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They are the ones who have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb of God, who have been made holy through the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God, who came to die in their place, to take away their sin and make them holy.

Which is the ultimate source of comfort for us on a day like today where we remember loved ones who have gone before us. Where we sing hymns like “For All the Saints” as we will to end our service today, and we don’t just think of St. Peter, or St. Augustine, but we specifically think of a loved member of our family, or a dear friend that has gone before us. Even in this great and well-known hymn we have the source of their holiness, and what makes them a saint just as it identifies us as saints in our own lives. “For all the saints who from their labor rest. Who thee by faith before the world confessed, Thy name, O Jesus be forever blessed.”

It’s not wrong or bad to remember the wonderful memories that we have of our loved ones, and how they showed mercy to you in your life. How they showed their faith through their actions and service to their families, children and friends. Even to remember fondly the times they were peacemakers and showed the true peace of God by pointing to His love and understanding. But their holiness and sainthood can only come from one source. The name of Jesus Christ. The epitome of holiness and perfection who lived a perfect life here on Earth. The one that is the focus of all of the praise, honor, and worship of heaven. For our dirty disgusting robes of sin are only made white through the blood of the Lamb of God. And in that place of holiness, where the saints are gathered, our beloved saints are not hungering or thirsting. They are not scorched by the sun or effected by wind, rain, hurricanes or tornadoes. They aren’t crying for us, or wishing they were still here on Earth. Instead the Lamb, in the midst of the throne, is their shepherd. The Lamb in the midst of the throne, is their focus and the source of their happiness. For the blood of the lamb has sanctified them, making them holy, and brought them to that place. So may we pray each and every day for the peace of God our Heavenly Father to remain with us, as we his saints, in the words of the hymn “Feebly struggle.” As we go forward in our lives of service to God and to each other, remembering those who in glory shine until the day when we see them again.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen.