

6 November 2005  
The Festival of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“One Church, of All the Saints”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12; Isaiah 26; Revelation 21-22

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the readings this morning, we heard two very different and distinct pictures of the Church. On the one hand, we heard of a glorious Church. The Church of Isaiah: a strong city in perfect peace. The Church of Revelation: the picture of perfection, the Church of Heaven, with glory, with no more tears, with the Lamb of God at its center and as its light. It is the Bride of Christ, with waters clear as crystal, and the tree of life. Who would not want to be in such a Church?

But then from the mouth of Jesus, we also heard of a struggling Church, where there are those who are poor in spirit, who need mercy, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are beset by wars and battles, who mourn, who are downtrodden, who are persecuted and falsely accused. It is not a *glorious* picture, but quite the opposite – a picture of struggle and trouble. And perhaps we think: who would *want* to be in such a Church?

But here’s the kicker: these are not two different Churches, but one and the same Church! The first is called the Church Triumphant, and the second the Church Militant. And you cannot have one without the other. Both are true of the Church, and not just with the thinking that the Church Triumphant equals Heaven, and the Church Militant equals earth. No! For already here and now, the Church is triumphant, even though it may not seem that way, or look that way. For as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, we are blessed. *Here and now* blessed! He didn’t say that we *will be* blessed, at some time in the future, in some distant, far off place named Heaven. No, Jesus said there that we *are* blessed, even in the midst of struggles and difficulties and turmoil. He didn’t promise *easy*, but He did promise *blessed*.

And so the Church Militant is already a part of the Church Triumphant, because the outcome of the battle is sure! Because the One who triumphed, who conquered, is with us. Because Jesus Christ is not just in Heaven, but with us here in the battle against sin, death, and the devil. And where He is there is no defeat. Where He is there is no losing. Where He is, there is the great company of the Church Triumphant: *the angels and*

*archangels and all the company of Heaven!*

And so it is as we sang in the processional hymn this morning. Even though “*we feebly struggle, and they in glory shine; yet all are one within God’s great design.*” (LW 191 v. 4) One Church, of *all* the saints. Of all who are forgiven; washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. These are the saints. For saints are not the high and pious and holier than thou folks. Not the ones who think they are saints. No. They are, in fact, not saints at all. For all who depend upon themselves and what they are able to accomplish are no saints, but the worst of sinners. But sinners washed by the blood of the Lamb in Holy Baptism, who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the Lamb in Holy Communion, who repent and are cleansed by this blood in Holy Absolution – *these* are God’s saints. Because He declares them His saints. And His Word does what it says.

And so this day is not just about others, or about those who have gone before us in Heaven – although it is that! This day is also about you. For it is All Saints Day, and by faith, that is what you are! And by faith, we believe it; for it is a reality that certainly cannot be seen!

For as you look at yourself, you know you’re no saint! No holy person! You know your sins and how great they are. And if you don’t, I’m sure your spouse or children or others around you would be more than happy to point out your faults! And when you look at our Church, it certainly doesn’t look like a Church of the saints! It is filled with people who fall and sin, who have issues, who don’t understand, who are fearful and timid, who fight and distrust. And look at our Synod, and the Church throughout the world, and you will find the same thing! Saints?! These people?! Maybe one or two of ‘em, right? But the rest of us? Nah – not even close.

And that’s true – *when we look at ourselves*. And right at that point, we can go in two different directions. **The first** direction is to try to make ourselves *look like* the saints we want to be. To try to make ourselves *look like* the Church Triumphant on earth. And so you know what we do? *We get determined!* Determined to sin less, and look better, and make the Church more attractive, and bigger, and shinier, and successful. And there are churches like that! Meeting in converted basketball arenas, with big money, and big followings. If we’re going to be saints then we’re going to **look like** saints and **do** saintly things! . . . But remember Jesus’ words? About who is blessed? We don’t need to *look like* the Church Triumphant to be the Church Triumphant! In fact, when we try to look like what we think the Church Triumphant should look like here on earth, *it is time to repent*, for it is idolatry. Churchly idolatry, perhaps, but idolatry nonetheless. Trying to make the Church what we want it to be. Trying to make it into our image – our image of good; our image of success; our image of saintliness. And the same is true when we try

to make *ourselves* look like saints. We've made ourselves, and our actions, and our improvement, and our accomplishments, idols. We have an ideal picture in our heads of what we and the Church should look like, and while it may look good in our mind and eyes, if you could see that image as God sees it, it would look like . . . well, a golden calf.

And so we need to repent, of this *idealism*, of this *triumphalism*. And that is, in fact, **the second** direction to go in, when you know you're not a saint. It is not to look to or at yourself, *but to repent and look to the cross*. For there, bleeding and dying as a condemned criminal, is **God's icon of success**. God doesn't need shiny, or bigger and better. He says: Look there! For there is God's Saint – His Holy One. There is the One who makes you holy. And that is how the world treats holy ones, saints. It nails 'em to the cross.

You see, you can't avoid the Church Militant. For as long as the Church is in the world, it will be constantly under the attack and assaults of Satan. Constantly bombarded by weakness and suffering. Constantly looking like the poor step child of the wealthy and successful of the world. And so the Church of God's saints is not the one that is the biggest, or the brightest, or the richest, or the most powerful – it is the Church on its knees; the Church under threat of violence; the Church speaking out against sin and evil; the Church living what the world considers the foolishness of God's Word; the Church relying on nothing but the strength of a condemned, crucified criminal.

And yet that is not only the Church Militant, but the Church *Triumphant*! Yes, already here and now, triumphant! For that condemned, crucified criminal, once dead, is now alive and with His Church on earth, and is the One fighting for us. We do not have the strength, but as we heard from Isaiah: "***O Lord, you will ordain peace for us; you have done for us all our works.***" He is the One who does it, and fights for us. Fighting with His Word and Sacraments; fighting with His forgiveness. And with these, triumphing! For with these He gives life to the dead, even as He is risen from the dead; He makes saints out of sinners, through the forgiveness that He earned in His death and resurrection; and He strips the enemy of all his power, for the empty tomb shows that all the enemy's power of sin and death has been defeated and overcome.

And so even though the battle continues to rage, and continues to rage not only in the world, but also in each of us, it is a battle that has already been won! The Church Militant is the Church Triumphant, just as you and I are sinners that are, in Christ, declared saints. *What we are cannot yet be seen, but that doesn't make it any less true.* For as I said before, you do not have to look triumphant to be triumphant. **We are what God says we are. His Word does what it says.** And it says to you and me and all the faithful who have gone before us: you are forgiven; you are my children, my saints.

Fight the good fight now, for great is your reward in Heaven. And that's not a *maybe*! That's a promise.

And so today we remember all the saints. The ones who have gone before us, the great saints of the Bible and history. The saints who lived among us, whom God called to their home this year. For me this year, that is Sophie and my mother. It is about the new saints, like little Joanna. It is about you and me, sinners made saints by our Saviour Jesus Christ. For saints, then and now, live by grace. All grace. All gift. All God's doing. It all starts and ends with Him. We are saints by the power of the Word, not the power of the world. And it is not the world that determines whether we are blessed or not, it is our Heavenly Father. And we take Him at His Word. Blessings may not look like blessings when they come – but we trust that we are blessed. In all things. By the One who laid down His life for us, to make us saints. And so we are.

And so we rejoice this day, with good reason. For no matter what happens to God's saints in this world, we are blessed, for we are forgiven. And we are safe, for we are in God's Church – here, both Militant and Triumphant. Inspired by the saints who have gone before us, and persevering for those still to come. For we are, in fact, one. One in Christ. The Saviour of all the saints.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.