

7 November 2010
The Feast of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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"Saints!"

Text: Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

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

Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? . . . These are the ones [who] . . . have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

That right there is what we celebrate today.

Today we do not celebrate the best of the best; those who have done such great and heroic acts in the name of Jesus that they are called saints. Those folks are important, but they generally have their own days of remembrance.

Today, we celebrate the work of Jesus. The great work of His death and resurrection **for you**. *His* heroic work that has made you and I His saints, His holy ones.

Today is for *all* the saints.

All those who have gone before us in Christ and now rest from their labors; all those - like you - who live by faith now; and all the saints still to come - like little Amber Biel, born on Friday, and who will be washed in the blood and forgiveness of Christ in a few weeks.

We have all been, as we prayed earlier, *knit together into one holy communion, into one church, one body of Christ*. Christians of all times and all places, united by Christ, united *in* Christ. Today is for them. Today is for you.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you are a saint?

Actually you have to believe it, because you can't see it. Because you, quite frankly, often do not act like one.

True saints live with this paradox: **true saints know they're sinners.**

If fact, true saints know it better than anyone else.

False saints believe they're saints by what they do.

True saints know they're not because of what they do.

For sin includes not just the sin that others can see - the sin that makes it out of our hearts and mouths and into our words and deeds, but also the sin that lurks in our hearts and minds.

The terrible, horrible thoughts and desires that pollute and corrupt us.

The outward deeds we can control somewhat. And we do . . . somewhat.

But the inward - who can control them?

The dreams that come at night, so filled with sinful and impure thoughts.

The anger or bitterness that so often rises in our hearts.

The self-centeredness that so often causes us to stiffen our necks and desires others serve us instead of giving ourselves for others.

True saints know these things. That we are poor, not rich, in spirit. That we are spiritual beggars. That we have no righteousness of our own, and no right to be called sons of God.

So how can you, who are such a sinner, claim today to be a saint?

Because to just such people, Jesus says today: **Blessed are you.**

Blessed, because when you have nothing and can claim nothing, then Jesus is your all. His forgiveness, His righteousness, His Spirit, His obedience, His perfection, His sacrifice, His life, His blood, give you what you do not have.

For to be a saint is not something earned, but given.

And so true saints look not to themselves, but *fix their eyes on Jesus* (Heb 12:1). And if He calls you blessed, you are blessed indeed. For His Word does what it says.

Now, by outward appearance, you may not look very blessed; you may not look very saintly. In fact, you may look cursed, with a life full of problems, difficulties, sins, and troubles. You may not look any different than the next guy, who may be anything - a Buddhist, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, or an atheist.

And yet you are different.

That is what John said to us today: **Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared.** You see, yes, you are God's child now, His dearly beloved, even if you do not look so now to the eyes of the world, or even in your own eyes. You are in the eyes of the only one that matters - in the eyes of God.

For in Holy Baptism God has made you His child, and so He looks at you differently now. Perhaps an example might be to liken how God looks at you to how many earthly parents look at their children and think they are the most beautiful creatures they have ever seen. And they should think that. But honestly, I've seen some pretty ugly babies! But parents think their child is beautiful because he or she is their child, and therefore precious and valuable and perfect. And so are you, dear child of God.

And so as John said: **See what kind of love the Father has given to us** - or some translation say: *lavished on us!* - **that we should be called children of God; and so we are.** Called children of God not just in words, but in reality.

For baptized into Christ, you are new, you are beautiful, you are a saint.

For in baptism, your sins, your ugliness, your imperfection, are forgiven.

And if you are forgiven, then you are holy. And if holy, then a saint.

And notice: that is what you **are**. Not what you *will be*, and not what you must *become*. That is the mistake some make in their theology - that what God has begun, we must finish. That God has made us children, but we must now become saints. It is up to you. No! What you are you are made so by Christ. It is His work *in* you and His work *for* you.

And so true saints are *not* those who are perfect, or almost perfect, or mostly good, or more good than bad -

but those who know their sins and mourn them;

who know their sins and hunger and thirst for righteousness;

who know their sins and so consider others better than themselves;

who know their sins and cry for mercy;

who know their sins and rely on one thing only: the lavish love and forgiveness of the crucified one.

The lavish love of Jesus, who came to bear our sins and take them away from us;

who came to atone for them on the cross for us and bear their punishment;

who came to us in lowliness to raise us to a new life in Him;

who came to us who are poor in spirit to give us His Spirit.

And so we are blessed.

The saints who have gone before us are blessed in the eternal presence of Christ, as we heard from John in the words of his Revelation. But we are blessed in the presence of the eternal Christ too, for Christ is present with us even here and now.

For as we sing in the liturgy of Holy Communion, "*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*" Those words first sung as Jesus entered Jerusalem to *die* for our sins are now sung as Jesus comes to us here in His Body and Blood for the *forgiveness* of our sins.

And we are blessed. We sinners are made saints.

Our ***robes are washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.***

Or as John also then said: ***everyone who thus hopes in him*** - not in ourselves and what we do, but ***everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.***

And so you are pure, forgiven, clean. Saints and children of God in Christ Jesus.

And know that this work of God in you will not leave you untouched. It will change your life. For you will live not just as the sinner you are, but also as the saint you are, as Christ and His Spirit live in you. And that will be hard - the old sinner in you will rebel and not go down without a fight, and the world will perhaps persecute and revile you. What then?

Rejoice and glad, Jesus says! ***For great is your reward in heaven.***

Nothing that happens to you here and now can change the reality of what your Saviour has done for you. For ***salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!***

And this salvation has been given to you.
And one day, you will join with that **great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, where persecution and hardship, pain and sadness, will be no more.

For now, **what we will be has not yet appeared.**

But what you will be *is who you now are!*

A dearly beloved child of God, one of His saints.

Do you believe that?

Believe it! For the tomb is empty, and Christ is here for you.

To give you what you do not have.

To raise you to life and make you His saint, that you may rest in Him, in His peace and love, both now and forevermore.

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.