

6 November 2011  
All Saints Day (observed)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The Communion of 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.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, **the communion of saints** . . . We speak that in the Apostles Creed, and we celebrate that today. The communion, or fellowship, or *koinonia*, of all the saints. All the saints gathered into the one Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. All the saints made holy by the Holy Spirit in the forgiveness of their sins. All the saints who are not dead, but living, for God is the God of the living. He is the God of life, and when He gives life, we have life; a life not even death can end. For Jesus, in His resurrection, has conquered death, and now made it but the gate to everlasting life. And we celebrate that today. Every Sunday, to be sure; but especially today, as we remember those who have passed through this life in faith, to the life of the world to come, where faith is no more. For they have received the goal of their faith. They now see what we *believe*.

Earlier this week, it was reported in the news that the population of the earth has now surpassed 7 billion. That’s a lot of people! But we heard today that the population of heaven is even greater. For, as John said, **After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.** And who was in that number? Patriarchs, prophets, apostles, fathers, and martyrs, down through the ages. Young and old, rich and poor, high and low alike. And some that you and I have known, who have just recently gone to join that great multitude. For, one of the Elders told John, **These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.** Coming. Present tense. Still coming. It is a continuous coming, a continuous gathering; the Holy Spirit, working still, enlarging the Church. And though that crowd is very diverse - people who lived in different ages and cultures - all have this in common: **They** are those who **have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.** You cannot, I think, come up with a better definition of a saint than that.

We sometimes, though, think otherwise. That saints are those people with so many feathers of good works in their caps that they go to heaven looking something like an Indian Chief! Well, while it is true, as we hear a little later in Revelation (14:13), that our *“deeds follow us,”* they do not justify us, or make us right with our Father in heaven. That is the work of Christ alone. It is the blood of the Lamb that washes

away the sin of the world, including the sin of the saints. And saints know that. They know that as long as their headdress may be, our Lord has an ever better one for them - a crown of glory, a crown of life, that will never fade away. A better headdress that makes all the feathers we may have in our caps look like . . . well . . . feathers!

But not only that - saints know, too, that while our good works are not as good as we think they are, so also our sins are worse than we think they are. Not only our words and deeds, but our thoughts and desires. How vile they are! How filthy. How ashamed would each of us be if everyone here today knew what we've done in the past, and all the unclean and evil that swirls around inside of us. So to cope with that, to give us hope, we magnify the good and belittle the sin. We're pretty good, after all, and not so bad. But while you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, God's isn't fooled at all. He sees things as they are. Which is why He sent His Son. To give us true hope. To do for us what we could not do for ourselves. To - instead of belittling our sins - pay the price for them and atone for them with His blood on the cross, and then break the grip of the grave in His resurrection, that *whoever believe in Him not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

Luther, meditating on that, put it this way:

*"There is no greater bondage than that of sin; and there is no greater service than that displayed by the Son of God, who becomes the servant of all, no matter how poor, wretched, or despised [we] may be, and bears [our] sins. It would be spectacular and amazing, prompting all the world to open ears and eyes, mouth and nose in uncomprehending wonderment, if some king's son were to appear in a beggar's home to nurse him in his illness, wash off his filth, and do everything else the beggar would have to do. Would this not be profound humility? Any spectator or any beneficiary of this honor would feel impelled to admit that he had seen or experienced something unusual and extraordinary, something magnificent. But what is a king or an emperor compared with the Son of God? Furthermore, what is a beggar's filth or stench compared with the filth of sin which is ours by nature, stinking a hundred thousand times worse and looking infinitely more repulsive to God than any foul matter found in a hospital? And yet the love of the Son of God for us is of such magnitude that the greater the filth and stench of our sins, the more He befriends us, the more He cleanses us, relieving us of all our misery and of the burden of all our sins and placing them upon His own back. All the holiness of the [world] stinks in comparison with this service of Christ, the fact that the beloved Lamb, the great Man, yes, the Son of the Exalted Majesty, descends from heaven to serve me" (Luther's Works, Vol. 22, p. 166).*

That's why all of you are saints. Because Christ has come to serve you. Because

though your sins are great, make no mistake about it - the blood of Christ is even greater. And for you He came, for you He was born, for you He lived, for you He suffered, for you He died, for you He rose from the dead, for you He ascended, and for you He is returning. For you, that - as the Small Catechism says - *you may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness* (Explanation to the Second Article). That you make take your place with all the saints.

But, you may object: *I don't look like a saint, and I still don't act like a saint.* And that is very true. You often act like the sinner you also are, for though your sins have been forgiven, you have been made a child of God in Holy Baptism, and you are a saint of God, still your sinful flesh clings to you and drags you down. Still, as St. Paul would say, *you do those things you do not want to do, and you don't do those things you want to do* (Romans 7). But remember, it is the saints in heaven who live by sight, not us. We still live by faith - faith which believes not what we see and feel, but the Word of God. Faith which believes that what our Father tells us is true, even if it is as seemingly absurd as calling you and me saints!

John told us about this today too. In his first epistle he wrote: ***See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*** (ARE. That's a statement of fact. And you cannot be a child of God and not be a saint! But he goes on . . .) ***Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.***

John knows we can't see the truth now; you can't see forgiveness. But you are pure, you are cleansed, you are forgiven, for we ***hope in Him***; our faith is in Him, not in ourselves or what we can do or accomplish. What we are now is hidden in this world and life. Hidden under the cross. Hidden under weakness and suffering. Hidden under our sinful flesh. But hidden does not mean absent. In fact, it means the exact opposite! For if it's hidden, it is there! You just can't see it.

And so it is with you. You are a saint and a child of God. How do you know? You are baptized. In those waters, Jesus did it and your Father announced it: *You are forgiven. You are my son, my daughter; in you I am well pleased.* That's the truth. That's the reality. Believe it, and give thanks to God!

And you know what will happen as you do that? You will live as saints. Not because you determine to, but because the Spirit of God will work in you. For as your eyes of faith look to Christ, the eyes of your body will look on your neighbor in love. As you repent of your sins, the sins of others won't loom so large. And as you pray for others, God will use you to fulfill those very prayers. And you know

what? You probably won't even see it or realize it. In fact, you'll probably think you're getting worse! Because focusing on Christ, you know your sin more and you know your need of forgiveness more! But that is what it means, as we prayed, to *imitate the saints in all virtuous and godly living* (Collect of the Day). It is to repent and rely and focus on Christ, and for Christ, then, to work in you and through you as you see Him in your neighbor.

And so, then, will the Beatitudes that we heard from Matthew be fulfilled in you. They are first and foremost not a standard for you to achieve blessedness. They are first and foremost a description of Christ. He was all those things. But then they are also true of *you* as you live in Christ and Christ lives in you.

It isn't easy. Just consider those things mentioned in the Beatitudes: to be poor in spirit, to mourn over our sin, to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, to be pure in heart, to be a peacemaker, to be persecuted and hated and reviled. How true it is, as we sang earlier: *We feebly struggle, they in glory shine* (LSB #677 v. 4). But they once struggled, too - the saints, and our Saviour blessed them and saw them through it all. Even through horrible martyr's deaths . . . which are still happening today. But nothing on this earth - not even death - can take away from you the blessing of God. What He gives no one can take away.

For chiefly, God has given you *Himself*. Think about that. He's given you lots of other things as well, but chief of all is the gift of *Himself*. He is your Father, you are His child. Forever. ***What great love the Father has given to us.***

And He has given you His Spirit, that you have the mind of Christ, that you never be alone, that you be filled with His love and forgiveness and life.

And now, now He gives Himself to you in the Body and Blood of Jesus, once given and shed for you on the cross, now given and placed into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sins. That you live in Him and He in you.

And as we gather around this altar, around the true and real presence of our Saviour, this, right here, is the gathering of all the saints. For those who have gone before us are not just in some "place" called heaven, somewhere very, very far away; to be in heaven is to be, as John said: ***before the throne and before the Lamb***. But the Lamb is here! His Body and Blood are here. And we confess that fact by singing the Agnus Dei right before we come to this altar: *Oh Christ, Thou Lamb of God!* And so they are here, too. All the saints. *The angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*. And we come and take our place with them around the Lamb. Now, by faith; but one day, by sight, when you and I, too, are ***called out of the great tribulation . . . and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.***

That's what today is all about. That reality, and that hope. That reality for them; that sure and certain hope for you and me. The mystery of our triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who gives Himself for you and to you. That we confess:

*I believe in God the Father . . .*

*and I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord . . .*

*and I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen!*

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.