

## All Saints Sunday 2020

**Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...**

Today as you know, churches all around the world are celebrating the Feast of All Saints... and in some churches they ring bells as the names of these saints are remembered... in other churches they tell stories – sing hymns – and some can be found praying to saints not only on this day (but all throughout the year)...

But the question is - what is a saint?...

That's a question that people have often asked throughout the years... and as you can imagine, there are as many answers (as there are questions)... and my guess is that when some people think of saints they think of people with exceptional faith... or people who have been known to perform super-human acts of love – or devotion – or even align their own lives with the beatitudes (that we find Jesus teaching us in our reading this morning from Matthew's Gospel)...

But what we often forget is that all saints (both living and dead) are still human beings... and when we look more closely at the lives of saints (so often we find that their lives are as complicated as our own)...

In fact, hailed in her lifetime as a living saint, some were troubled to learn that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had told her spiritual director that she spent most of the years of her ministry in deep doubt, including her belief in the existence of God...

From what I have read, this was discovered through more than 65 years of correspondence between Mother Teresa and her spiritual confidants (which came to light after her death)... The publication of the correspondence was not intended to mar her international reputation; but those seeking her sainthood wanted to present the nun as she really was, serious doubts and all...

In fact, when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Mother Teresa proclaimed to the world that she accepted the award in the name of the poor: "*And through this award and through all of us gathered here together*", she began, "*we are wanting to proclaim the good news to the poor that God loves them, that we love them, that they are somebody to us,*" and then continued, "*that they too have been created by the same loving hand of God, to love and to be loved.*"...

This was very much like Jesus... Yet months earlier, she wrote these words to a confidant, "*Jesus has a very special love for you, but as for me, the silence and emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.*"...

In other words, to accept Mother Teresa as a saint is to take her doubts and all as one who loved the poor as Jesus taught us to do in the beatitudes, even when she didn't feel God's presence for herself...

Now, what I'm ***not*** going to do this morning is *try to explain why some people pray to saints* (and why some churches put certain people on pedestals – and others don't)... but what I'd like to do this morning is tell you what Lutherans believe about saints – and in perfect Lutheran fashion – I'll encourage you to leave here this morning asking your own questions (and making your own decisions about what it might mean to be a saint in the world that we are living in right now)...

Let me begin by saying that Martin Luther – the one who started the Protestant Reformation – was, as you know, a Roman Catholic... and as the story's told – Luther was on his way home one night and he was struck by lightning... thinking he was about to die (Luther himself prayed to one of the saints – to St. Anne – promising that if he lived he would devote himself to God)... and we all know that Luther made good on his promise (and devoted himself as an Augustinian monk and an ordained priest)...

To keep a long story short – Luther started to study the Bible (in fact, he would eventually get a doctorate in biblical studies and would go on to teach at the University of Wittenberg)... and as Luther studied the scriptures and tried to discover the truth of what the Bible actually says (he noticed that many of the things that the Church was teaching had no biblical support – and in some ways it was in direct opposition to it...

And there's a famous trip that Luther made to the 'Holy City' of Rome... and when he arrived he noticed that there was more sin in that city (and in the lives of the priests he came into contact with along the way) than anywhere else he had ever been... and so all of these experiences (and in his search for truth) Luther begins to develop this idea that putting people on pedestals – including a pope (is not only dangerous and deceiving) but it isn't God's will... all it was (was religious mysticism that has no real basis in Scripture)...

That's why as Lutherans we believe that there are no perfect people... there's no person without sin... in fact, even St. Paul acknowledges in Romans 3:23, "*All have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God*"... and we know that even St. Peter denied our Lord not once (but three times)...

And it's why many of us agree with the thought of the realistic, yet cynical, Ambrose Bierce when he once remarked that "*A saint is really just another dead sinner, who's life was later revised and edited*"... presumably because if we knew the truth of the saint's hidden life, we would undoubtedly find a truth more complicated (and less holy) than their legend would reveal... because at the end of the day (even saints put their pants on one leg at a time)...

I mean, what did St. Anthony really know about getting kids to school on time or working all week long just to pay the mortgage?... and if he knew the struggle of what some of you are going through right now – would his life have remained as 'holy'... we don't know?... but these are questions that come up when we talk about the saints...

But as a Lutheran we're also quick to add "*that no Christian is completely without his or her good qualities*"... that there's also good within all of us (because Christ dwells within us)... which is why as Lutherans we say that every Christian is two things at once (we are both 'Saint and Sinner') simultaneously... yes, we do fail at times (and often we pay a heavy price) but truth be told – we also do so much good... you do so much good...

You see, yes we celebrate the lives of the saints (and we remember their lives – not so that we can worship them) but so that as fellow believers, who were on the same road that we are on now, they can teach us how to carry on with faith when there are bumps along the way...so that we can draw strength from and imitate the virtuous aspects of their lives – learn from them – and allow ourselves to see what is possible inside each one of us (as we reflect on Who was inside all of them)...

You see, as Lutherans – we don't believe that saints have 'reserved' status... we don't believe that saints have super-human abilities... we certainly don't believe that they are loved by God more than others – or given special treatment in the VIP section of Heaven – but what we celebrate as Lutherans is God's ability to use flawed people (like you and me) to do God's work on earth (as it is in Heaven)...

Friends, that means that (in the eyes of God) you are a saint... I am a saint... a saint about to be made known... (and it has nothing to do with whether or not we have the stigmata (which has no biblical support) – or if we can take a bullet to the head and still live and then forgive the people who shot us)... we're saints (because in the brokenness of this world) Christ dwells within us (and God uses us to do His work in the world)...

In fact, 1 John 3:2 it says, “*Beloved, we are God’s children now*”... and then it goes on to say, “*and what we will be has not yet been revealed... but what we do know is this; that when he (Christ) is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is...And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*”...

You know friends, you may not view yourself as a saint (and so often it’s because what we generally focus on is our sin - or our shortcomings - or our weaknesses – and because we know ourselves best we know that these aspects of our lives are less than holy)

But what I’m trying to get you to see this morning is that there’s also so much good in us as well (and that right now – God is using every one of us to do His work – in this place – through this ministry – with our lives)... and yes we may sin (and we know how ugly it is) – but let the truth be told – we also bless... and as a fellowship (trying to support each other through very difficult days) we should spend more time focused on that truth (so that we can show the world a witness to what God can do)...

Let me close by telling you that the saints that I remember most dearly (are the men and women that I have had the privilege of knowing as I have served this church for the last 19 years)... ordinary people (like you and me) – in no way perfect (but in every way fighting the good fight – and witnessing to the Light)...

I can remember Dan Clayton calling me one night and saying, “Hey Big Guy – the doctor says I have a brain tumor” – and in his last days (I am not going to sugar coat it) Danny suffered... he struggled at times to collect his thoughts – could no longer leave his house – and had to have constant bedside care... and if you knew how charming – energetic – funny – and independent that he was (you’d understand how painful it was to watch him go through all of this)...

But what will always amaze me – is that Danny never lost his faith (in a loving God)... he never stopped believing in the Kingdom – and he never stopped praising Jesus even in the worst part of the storm... and after I’d give him Communion (and we finished saying the Lord’s prayer) he’d always squeeze my hand just a little bit (to give me that same encouragement – for my own road ahead)...

And the reason why I bring that up (is because so often I have wondered – how would I keep faith when the world starts closing in)... I’d like to believe that my

own faith wouldn't be shattered (and only by the Grace of God will it remain intact)... but I can look to people like Danny (and his witness not only gives me hope) but it reminds me (that saints really do exist)... and it's not their perfection that makes them so inspiring (it's the way they carried their faith – through the struggle)...

And always keeping to heart the promise of Isaiah 42:3 – which says:

*“When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.”...*

Those are the types of saints that I know (and the people that I praise God's name for knowing)...

Leave here today remembering – a saint lives within all of us... and our job (is to let that saint be made known to the world)...

May the goodness of God fill your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus... May the blessings of peace be made known to you in service... and may you continue to grow in desire to make a difference in this world...

In Jesus name we pray...

**Amen!**