

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
All Hallows Eve and All Saints Day
Saturday, October 31st, 2020
Sunday, November 1st, 2020

Sermon: What's a Saint?
Text: Ephesians 1:1

Focus: God makes us holy by faith in Christ.
Function: That they would rejoice in their blessed status as God's people.
Structure: Question-Answered
Locus: "I believe in... the communion of saints..." (Apostles' Creed).

Question: What Is a Saint?

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Today is our annual celebration of All Saints Day, which can be a bit alarming or confusing to people who haven't grown up in the Lutheran Church. For those who come from a Roman Catholic background, it may surprise you that Lutherans should commemorate the saints, especially when we so ardently refuse to show them any form of devotion. And yet, while Lutherans may not *pray* to the saints, we most certainly *do* hold them up as heroes of the faith. For those of you coming from a Reformed or Baptist background, the fact that Lutherans observe All Saints' Day may only confirm in your mind what you have suspected all along—that Lutherans are really just "Catholic lite." Just as Zwingli, Calvin, and the radical reformers argued that Luther didn't go far enough in his theology, so also Lutherans seem not to have come very far from their Catholic roots.

Yet both these judgments betray a misunderstanding of what it means to be a saint. So that is the question before us on this All Saints Day: what does it mean to be a "saint"? What's a saint?

First False Answer: A dead Christian.

Many Christians, especially the Orthodox and Roman Catholics, believe that saints are dead Christians up in heaven who watch over us and protect us. They may even invoke the saints to petition God on their behalf, much as you might ask a fellow Christian here on earth to pray for you in your hour of need.

But the New Testament makes it quite clear that the souls in heaven lack awareness of what is happening down here on earth. The souls under the altar in heaven ask, “How long, O Lord, until you avenge our blood upon the earth,” because they cannot see the signs (cf. Rev. 6:10). Father Abraham and other saints of the Old Testament cannot visit the rich man in hell or his brothers on earth because of a “great chasm” that none of the living or dead may cross (Luke 16:26).

And as far as praying to the saints is concerned, remember that Jesus promises that *God* hears and answers our prayers. But there is no such promise or indication in Scripture that the saints in heaven can hear us at all.

No, the word saint doesn’t mean a dead Christian. In fact, the Greek word for “saints” (*hagio*) occurs 61 times in the New Testament, nearly all referring to living, breathing Christians still on earth, such as in Paul’s greetings to the churches in his epistles: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1, ESV).¹ “To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (Col. 1:2).

Saints don’t have to be dead. You and I can be saints. Yes, we can. But how? Is there something in our actions or behavior that determines whether or not we are saintly?

Second False Answer: A Christian who led an extremely holy life.

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Unfortunately, in popular piety and pop culture, saints are often portrayed as people filled with such holiness that they have their head in heaven and their feet on earth. They're so holier-than-thou that they are nearly unapproachable. Perhaps they were burned at the stake or stoned to death because of their faith in Jesus. Maybe they preached sermons that converted thousands or millions to Christ. Perhaps they worked miracles of healing for the sick (think of Mother Theresa). Who of us could ever aspire to their level of holiness?

Frederick Buechner writes, "Many people think of saints as plaster saints, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed their whole lives long. As far as I know, real saints never even come close to characterizing themselves that way."² As another preacher writes, "generally speaking, the saints are not distinguished by their goodness."³

Prior to their conversions, many of the Church's saints committed great evil or suffered dastardly reputations. St. Paul the Apostle, who formerly persecuted the Church, rounding up Christians to be tossed into jail and even murdered, called himself the "chief" of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15, KJV). St. Mary Magdalene, for whom my mother was named,⁴ needed to have seven demons exorcised from her (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). St. Augustine famously prayed, "Lord, make me chaste—but not yet!" And who can forget the bizarre Desert Fathers, such as St. Simeon the Stylite, who lived most of his life perched atop a platform fixed to a pole?⁵

² Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (New York: Harper, 2004), s.v. "saint," 352.

³ Taylor, "God's Handkerchiefs," 211.

⁴ Marlene is a portmanteau of "MARY MagdaLENE."

⁵ http://thecresset.org/2012/Michaelmas/Matthis_M2012.html

These people were not called saints because of any great work. Prior to conversion, many of them were scoundrels. Some of them *remained* rascals even *after* they were baptized. Being a good person doesn't make you a saint. There is only one who is good: God.

Gospel-Based True Answer: A Christian made holy by faith in Christ.

And so we come, at last, to the proper answer to our question, "What is a saint?" Put simply, a saint is any Christian who believes in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. You don't even need to be baptized. The thief on the cross did not have a chance to be baptized before he gave up the ghost, but he still confessed faith in Christ: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," to which Jesus replied, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

"The feet of saints," Buechner writes, "are as much of clay as everyone else's, and their sainthood consists less of what *they* have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them."⁶ And, more importantly, what God has by his grace chosen to do *in* us and *for* us. God makes saints; we don't. He makes us saints when he forgives our sins and gives us faith to believe that the blood of Jesus washes away all our sins.

Luther supposedly wrote that Christians are at once both sinner and saint—*simul iustus et peccator*. In fact, Luther doesn't use the word "saint" in his Latin dictum. A more literal rendering is that a Christian is at once "both righteous and a sinner." Yet the righteousness we have as sinner-saints is not a righteousness all our own. We are not righteous (*iustus*) or holy (*sanctus*) because of something *we* ourselves have done. That would be works righteousness. And, as we heard in last week's epistle lesson from Romans, "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). We cannot save ourselves or make ourselves

⁶ Buechner, *ibid.*

right with God. We cannot make ourselves holy. Rather, God must do all the saving and justifying. *He* makes us holy. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther asks why the Holy Spirit is called the *Holy* Spirit. The answer: because *He* makes *us* holy. He gives us *Christ's* righteousness.

God has made us holy by his Holy Spirit operating and working through holy *things*: Christ's Word and Sacraments. In fact, even the phrase in the Creed that we translate as "communion of saints" (*koinōnia hagiōn*)—literally, "communion of holy [people]"—could just as well read "communion of holy *things*." Through the holy things of the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains our faith in Christ. He forgives our sins. He connects us to the life of God. He justifies us and sanctifies us. He makes us holy—saints. And when we become saints, we find ourselves in good company—a great "cloud of witnesses," as Hebrews 12:1 has it.

All of us in the Church are family. We're brothers and sisters in Christ. And our mothers and fathers in the faith who have gone before us—the ones already in heaven—are part of that same family. "We have the same blood running in our veins—Christ's blood." We are part of them, and they are part of us, because the Church is one Body, and we all together *in* Christ.

In the old days, churches used to have cemeteries where they buried the members of their parish. In Europe and in the Mid-West, many churches still do have their own cemeteries. But here in the West, real estate is too precious, so most of us end up at a private cemetery.

Yet in those old, country churches, such as my dad's former congregation, St. Nicholas Lutheran Church in Fairfax, South Carolina, the church cemetery is usually situated on the other side of the back wall of the chancel. In other words, if you were to kneel at the Communion rail and remove the wall behind the altar, you would find the tomb stones and grave markers

completing a circle. This is the fellowship of the Church, the communion of saints, the gathering of holy people around holy things. Some holy people (saints) are living, and some are dead, but we are all united by faith in Christ.

All the strange, quirky, and sometimes irreverent believers are just some of the sinner-saints who make up the company of heaven, the Body of Christ, the communion of saints. They lived and died with faith in Christ. And so they are with Christ forever. Someday we will see them again, when we see Jesus face to face. “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” (1 John 3:2).

But they are still with us—all those saints. When we kneel at this Communion rail, they complete the circle. The Lord's Supper is a family meal, after all—a great Thanksgiving (*Eucharist*) celebration. And the people on the “other side of the wall” are just as much a part of our fellowship as the ones who stand on this side. In that way, I suppose, not only All Saints Day, but every celebration of Holy Communion is kind of like a family reunion for all the saints. Thank God that we are part of that gathering too. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.