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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
All Saints Day (Observed)
Saturday, November 6th, 2021
Sunday, November 7th, 2021

Title: Unlikely Saints
Texts: Revelation 7:9-17

Focus: God makes us saints (holy) by the blood of Jesus.

Function: That they would wait in joy and hope for the final consummation of all things.

Structure: Definition

Locus: “He is the Holy Spirit because He makes us holy” (Large Catechism).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.... They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:10, 14, ESV).¹ Last Monday, November 1st, was All Saints Day, and every year at Epiphany we observe All Saints Day on the first Sunday in November. But what *is* a saint, exactly? That’s not a term we use very often in the Lutheran Church, unless we are speaking of “the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the fifth chapter,” or the letters of “Saint Paul.” Who are these saints, and what is our relationship to them? And how do you *become* a saint?

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

If you come from a Roman Catholic background, you are probably familiar with a whole bevy of saints' days, on which a particular saint is remembered on the date of his or her death. During the Middle Ages, many Christian parents named their children after the saints on whose feast days they were born. Thus, Martin Luther was born on the Feast of St. Martin of Tours.

Many churches are named after particular saints and often feature statues of their namesakes (St. Paul's and St. John's are particularly popular among Lutherans). In St. Louis there is even a St. *Trinity* Lutheran Church because the German word for "holy" and "saint" is similar (*Heilig* vs. *Heilige*), and when the congregation finally stopped speaking German and converted to broken English, something got lost in translation.

I have been told it is common custom in the Catholic Church to tell stories of the lives of the saints instead of preaching the Gospel, but such hagiography only tends to happen in the Lutheran Church on Reformation Day. [*Wink, wink.*] The Catholic Church has patron saints for every vocation and area of life. There are patron saints for soldiers,

sailors, murderers, thieves, beggars, and more. St. Joseph, the step-father of Jesus, who was a carpenter, is the patron saint of fathers, expectant mothers, and tradesmen. St. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes.

My favorite saint of legend is St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers. St. Christopher supposedly carried the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus across a flooded river on his back. St. Christopher medals were once commonplace among travelers. The name Christopher, of course, means “Christ-bearer” or “Christ-bringer.” (*Aside: Quite a fitting name for a preacher, don’t you think?!).*

When I was a prospective student visiting Notre Dame, I heard a chapel sermon about Mother Cabrini (whose shrine is on the top of Lookout Mountain in Golden, Colorado). The priest recounted a time that he was having trouble finding a parking spot at the hospital, so he prayed to Mother Cabrini, and right after he finished his prayer, a spot opened up. Apparently, she is the patron saint of parking spots. No

joke! As one New York City priest explains [*use accent*]: “She lived in New York. She understands traffic.”²

In the Lutheran Church we also commemorate certain days as saints’ days, but we rarely take note of them unless they happen to fall on a Sunday when the preacher is looking for a different set of lectionary readings to guide his message. In other words, when you run out of material, preach on a saint’s day. Yet even then the Word of God must rule the day.

Nor in the Lutheran Church do we invoke the saints in prayer, holding that, because Christ is our one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), we don’t need to ask the faithful departed to pray for us. We do not venerate their statues or images. Besides, there is no indication in Scripture that the saints in heaven can even *hear* us, let alone have any awareness of what is happening here on earth (cf. Rev. 6:9-11; Luke 16:26). Not even the blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord, is our intercessor. Yet Jesus and the Holy Spirit pray for us unceasingly—24/7. (Cf. Rom. 8:26, 34).

² <https://bustedhalo.com/features/FrJamesMartinSaintFinderofKeys.htm>

But I still haven't answered the question: What is a saint? In the Catholic Church, sainthood is a long process that takes place after you die. First it must be proven that you led a "heroically virtuous" life. Then, only after a very careful investigation to verify supposed martyrdom or miracles performed by you, the pope may "canonize" you as a saint. Such miracles may include the stigmata (wounds of Christ), levitation, bilocation, miraculous healings.

But the Bible makes it much easier. Simply stated: a saint is anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The word "saint" means a holy person—it's the same word in New Testament Greek (*hagios*). Repeatedly throughout the New Testament, when the apostle Paul addresses the members of a Christian congregation in one of his thirteen epistles, he frequently refers to them as "saints," holy people.³ And how does one become holy? When your sins are washed away in the blood of Jesus. When you are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from works of the Law. When you believe the

³ See, for example, Paul's salutations in Rom. 1:7; Rom. 12:13; 15:26; 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1, 15; Phil. 1:1; etc.

Gospel for the first time. When you are baptized. When God gives you the gift of faith, you immediately become a saint!

In Revelation 7, the great multitude from every nation and language comprises the saints of God—all believers who ever lived and ever will live. They are clothed in white, representing the purity and righteousness that they received from Christ. They did nothing to make themselves holy or earn their sainthood. They're not like the angel Clarence in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, who had to earn his wings by doing good deeds. No, the saints of God believe and trust in God for every good thing. They cry out, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:10). The Lamb is Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the Lamb who died in our stead for our sins. The saints know they can do nothing to save themselves, so Jesus did it all.

According to Frederick Buechner, "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," when, in fact, "the feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody 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.”⁴ It’s not what you’ve done or haven’t done in life that makes you a saint. It’s simply and solely what God has done for you in Christ Jesus. When you realize that your sainthood depends on Jesus, it opens up a whole new world—and an entirely different list of saints, a motley crew of bizarre, sometimes crude, and never dull people. There are saints in heaven and saints on earth. All who believe in Christ are holy.

Consider the thief on the cross (commonly called Dittmas), who in the span of only three hours went from mocking and cursing Jesus to praying to him: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” to which Jesus replied, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). St. Paul persecuted Christians before he became one. He called himself the “chief” of sinners and admitted that he had no right to be an apostle. Then think of St. Augustine, a virile young man who, before he became a Christian, prayed, “Lord, make me chaste—but *not yet!*” Consider Polycarp, bishop and martyr, who

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 352. Emphases added.

taunted his executioners as they burned him at the stake. And then, when the flames didn't kill him, they finally had to thrust a sword in his belly to put an end to his ridicule. Remember St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra, who got thrown in the slammer after punching the heretic Arius in the face at the Council of Nicaea. Don't leave out Martin Luther, who cussed in the pulpit and made fart jokes in his letters. And then there is Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who even while she served the lepers and outcasts of Hindu society in the name of Jesus, still recorded her own doubts and struggles with faith in her private journals.

And then there is my Grandad, St. Harold, a lifelong skeptic and engineer who routinely poopooed the claims of the Gospel. Yet on his death bed, his guilty conscience drove him to admit, "I haven't done a lot of shiny things in life." To which I smiled and said, "That's okay, Grandad. Jesus did all the shiny things for you." He smiled with tears in his eyes and replied, "I believe it." And so he is saved—and is now a saint among the other faithful departed. Like the thief on the cross, my Grandad experienced a "deathbed conversion." But his faith was real. God gave it to him. Faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9).

Martin Luther coined a helpful Latin phrase to describe the lives of Christians on this side of heaven. He said that we are *simul iustus et peccator*, “at the same time both righteous and a sinner,” or, put more colloquially, “simultaneously sinner and saint.” As saints, we have been justified—declared righteous—by the grace of God because Jesus died and rose again. As sinners, we struggle against our old sin nature until the day we die. We are simultaneously saints and sinners. Yet we are *forgiven* sinner-saints. We have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Christ has made us clean. “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18).

We look at ourselves in the mirror of God’s Law and see all of our faults and failings. Surely, we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed. We can’t deny it, and we have no excuse. But we don’t need an excuse. Because we have a Savior who bled and died on the cross to forgive our sins. Christ shed his blood *for you*, to make you his own. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from, what you’ve

done or haven't done. Christ died *for you*. And now he lives for you.

And if you will believe in him, you also will live with him forever.

The Church is full of unlikely saints, including you and me. The Church is not a museum for dusty, old saints. The Church is a field hospital for sinners. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim. 1:15). Yet no matter how much of a sinner I may be, Jesus remains a greater Savior. And that's what makes me a saint. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.