

MATTHEW 5.1-12  
ALL SAINTS DAY (observed)

*Saints of Old, Saints of Now*

November 2, 2003

Rev. Dr. Jonathan C. Naumann  
Redeemer Lutheran Church  
Oakmont, Pennsylvania

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IN NOMINE JESU

A lot of what we as Lutherans do is the culmination of many years of tradition. Many of us who were not around when these “traditions” began, when asked why we do what we do, respond by saying, “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” not really knowing the reasons behind our corporate actions. Today is no exception for us — on this Sunday as we observe All Saints’ Day.

We are celebrating today in the liturgy known as the Common Service of 1888, a liturgy used at one time or another by all Lutherans in this country, a liturgy which itself came into its present form over the course of centuries, with part of our liturgy having come from the pre-Christian Jewish synagogue tradition.

Our opening hymn, “For All the Saints,” is a relatively new invention; this hymn is just under 100 years old. But our celebration of those who have recently died in the faith can be traced back to the early Church—the fourth century, to be more precise.

In 360 AD, a day was set aside to honor those who were martyred for the sake of the Gospel. By 835 AD, No-

vember 1st had been appointed as the date to remember all the saints, martyred or peacefully called home. And now we celebrate this occasion on the first Sunday in November.

The early Church had also appointed dates to commemorate selected saints: the Apostles, the Evangelists, St. Michael and All Angels (as we celebrated in September), St. Mary (mother of our Lord), and selected others. Once in a while, the question is asked as to whether it is indeed proper to have these minor festivals. The answer remains the same: It is most certainly appropriate for us to do so, as we consistently continue in the tradition established by the early Church.

Honoring the faithful departed sainted souls is a practice that is completely compatible with what we as Lutherans believe, teach, and confess. In fact, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states:

*“Our Confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we should thank God for showing examples of His mercy, revealing His will to save men, and giving teachers and other gifts to the Church. Since these are His greatest gifts, we should extol them very highly; we should also praise the saints themselves for using these gifts, just as Christ praises faithful stewards.*

*The second honor is the strengthening of our faith: when we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we are encouraged to believe that grace does indeed abound more than sin.*

*The third honor is the imitation, first of their faith and then of their other virtues, which each should imitate in accordance with his calling. Our opponents [the Roman church] do not require these real honors; they only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly unnecessary.*

*"Besides, we grant that the angels pray for us. This is attested to by Zech. 1:12, where the angel prays, 'O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou have no mercy on Jerusalem?' We also grant that the saints in heaven pray for the Church in general, as they prayed for the Church universal while they were on earth....." (Ap XXI 4-9)*

The saints' days were appointed to be celebrated on the anniversary dates of their respective deaths. But there comes a point at which the entire liturgical year could be flooded with saints' days, with the temptation to overshadow the three major festivals: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

**So, for the sake of good order, the Church sets aside one day each year to remember and thank God for those whom He has called home over the previous twelve months.**

Here in this congregation, we thank God for the gift of faith He gave to those of our membership and of our families, those who died having saving faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior,

those whom the Lord has called home since our last celebration of All Saints.

We will give thanks to God for their faith in our prayers today. As Christians we seek to imitate them in their faith and their example of it.

Characteristics of the saints are given by our Lord in our text, also known as the Beatitudes. Jesus is not commanding us to be of a particular attitude, but He is telling us what the characteristics of His holy people — the saints — are, and that His people are blessed as a result. Many of those whom we remember today had these characteristics of which our Lord speaks.

He announces that these people with these characteristics are truly blessed. As Christians, as saints on earth, we would do well to imitate the faith that the saints now in heaven exhibited while they were with us, giving us the example to follow. As they were imitators of Christ, so we are imitators of them.

Our Lord tells us why we are blessed, stating what His blessing to us is in each beatitude. However, the characteristics Jesus gives at the beginning of today's Gospel reading are hard for us to logically accept because such are not looked upon favorably by the world. What is so holy, the world may ask, about being poor in spirit, in mourning, meek, hungry and thirsting for righteousness, or even being persecuted, as Jesus mentions at the end of our text?

We may not get past the first beatitude because we don't know what it means to be poor in spirit. To be poor in spirit is to be so destitute (so spiritually bankrupt) that we cannot even lay claim to our God, to empty ourselves completely in service to Him, to deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow Him.

This is the first and chief characteristic among the saints. The saints, before they went to heaven, were also sinners. The problem they had is the same that we now have. We too are sinners — sinners who are poor in spirit whether we recognise it or not.

This is why we are not very good examples of ideal Christians all the time. This is why we shrink away from boldly proclaiming our faith to others as we should. This is why our faith, left uncultivated shrivels up and dies. Because we are “poor in spirit.”

As sinners, we hunger and thirst for a way out of our predicament, for we have none of the characteristics of righteousness or holiness by and of ourselves. But thanks be to God that there is one who has all of these — our dear Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

He exemplified the Beatitudes. He was poor in spirit, emptying Himself completely, as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for us. He mourned over an unbelieving Jerusalem, of which we are a part.

He is meek; He tells us later in St. Matthew's Gospel that He is gentle and

humble in heart, and we will find rest in Him for our souls as He fills us, satisfying our hunger and quenching our thirst with His righteousness.

As his blessed mother Mary sang in the Magnificat, “He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich He has sent away empty.” Our Lord is indeed merciful, forgiving us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Jesus, the Holy One, is pure in heart, has seen God, and is God! Jesus, the righteous One, was persecuted for our sake, that He would obtain for us righteousness and the kingdom of heaven by the shedding of His blood and His covering up our sins with His blood.

Our heavenly Father looks at us and sees His Son's sacred work when we are joined to Jesus by faith. For Jesus' sake the Father declares us forgiven — righteous in His sight. We rejoice and are glad, for now we are no longer mere sinners but “sinner-saints.”

**Our Lord will drop the “sinner” part from that label when He calls us home to heaven, where we will be joining those whom we loved and have lost over the past year.**

In a few moments we will be reunited with them for a short time by the mystery of the Holy Supper. At the al-

tar we come hungering and thirsting for righteousness and our Lord fills us with His Word and with His holy body and precious blood.

Before we approach the altar we sing in the Sanctus of our Lord's coming to us, bringing all of heaven with Him. You know the words: "Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory! ...Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who cometh in the Name of the Lord!"

At this feast our Lord comes down to us, bringing all of heaven with Him: the angels, the archangels, and all the company of heaven, including all the saints who are in heaven with Him.

When we gather on this side of the altar, so to speak, our Lord comes to us in His Supper, and all of heaven joins Him on the other side. We, who have been made pure in heart, in whom our God creates clean hearts and renews a right spirit within each of us, truly see God as our Lord comes to us within the bread and wine.

As the saints in heaven come down and join us in this celebration, they are partaking of the marriage Feast of the Lamb in His kingdom, which has no end. Today He gives us a foretaste of this same Feast. Is your husband among the saints in heaven? He will be right here, eating and drinking with you.

Did the Lord call your mother to Himself? She, too, is drinking of the cup with you at this Feast. Do you have grandparents, siblings, or friends who

are now with Jesus? If so, then they also join you in singing praises to our God, thanking Him for the gift of faith He gave to them and still gives to us this day.

May we, by the Holy Spirit, say in our last hour here on earth, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people," and again, "Make us to be numbered with Thy saints in glory everlasting!" Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Amen!

*"Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25).*

SOLI DEO GLORIA