

Sunday, November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17 | John 3:1-3 | Matthew 5:1-12

Saints Alive!

503 years ago, a priest by the name of Martin Luther posted his now famous “95Thesis” on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. Why this date? He knew that the next day November 1st All Saints Day would be one of the best attended days for worship. The Papal decree first expressed in 1484 had declared that all the faithful were under a day of holy obligation of worship. The people believed that they needed to worship on All Saints Day in order to release souls from what was not fully known or understood as purgatory. This was the waiting place between heaven and hell and this was where people believed that in some situations, those who had died had not yet been received in heaven. At the time of this papal decree it was thought that every time a person entered into the church an individual would be released from this in between place so attendance on November 1st soared! Luther knew this and by posting his thoughts on how the church needed to be reformed the evening before this hallowed day, he got the attention of believers. This began the Reformation!

The celebration of All Saints Day is not new. The early Christian believers, as far back as the 3rd and 4th Century set aside one day a year to remember and honor all Christian martyrs. In the 2nd century, Polycarp, the Bishop of the church at Smyrna was burned at the stake because he refused to call Caesar “God”. Before the fire was lit, his captors said: “Come now, bishop, where is the harm in just saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ and offering incense, when it will save your life?” Polycarp replied: “eighty-six years have I served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How can I then blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

There are many people who have also made this same confession/ profession of faith prior to their death and they have been recognized as martyrs and also as saints. Even Paul the apostle was put to death because of his faith and we realize how many people he taught about Jesus through his journeys and in the establishment of churches. There are also many people who stood up for their faith and are now resting with God in heaven until Jesus returns to earth. This is why, on this All Saints Day, we stop and consider the cloud of witnesses, family members, brothers and sisters in the faith who have died holding to the secure promises of forgiveness and salvation, guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But how do we define who these people are? Who are the saints in our memory? Whom we know and admire and how might we learn from them and be like them?

In Matthew 5 Jesus saw crowds of people gathering in a valley to hear him speak. He ascended up the side of a mountain where he sat down. There he began to share in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount and taught many life lessons. This first portion is known as the Beatitudes which we sang as blessings. According to Jesus' teaching who are the ones who are blessed? The people who are spiritually poor, the mourners the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as well as the merciful, the heart filled and peacemakers. He described these people in ways that the crowd did not expect. Those who are blessed are those who will offer blessings to others in all different ways. Those who are blessed are also the ones who will be welcomed into heaven just like those who had been persecuted before them.

The people listening to Jesus' teaching were not sure what to think- how could they inherit the kingdom of God? As Jesus taught- by simply being faithful and living their lives in contrast to what the rest of the world expected. And we are to do likewise—and more! We are to shine for others to see so that others who do not know Christ will want to follow. When was the last time you shone for Christ through what you said and did? Or maybe it might be easier to ask when have you not done or behaved your best? Maybe you were angry about something, or questioned authority of a sales clerk, or frustrated because the store did not have what you thought you needed. Maybe you ended up standing in line and did not expect to, or even said something hurtful to someone else unintentionally. You will question yourself again and again throughout your life. The answer will come when you are received into God's heavenly kingdom and you are embraced in love. Have you done your best for Jesus? Have you tried? It is difficult to do so in this current era of staying at home and staying safe when Jesus tells us to go and tell others. But how does one do both? In these moments it is time for self-reflection and even taking the time to ask God how you might be a better person because you want to follow Jesus' teachings.

And why do we want to follow Christ's teachings? Because we are God's children- God created us and we belong to him. God loves you and the love God has given us is that we should be called His children now. The question we must ask ourselves- God loves you, but what kind of relationship do you have with God? Like any relationship people have with others, it takes work responsibility and love. So what do you do to keep this relationship growing? One of the basic necessities of being in relationship with God is to have and show and share love as demonstrated by Jesus. To learn more about growing in relationship with God each one of us

must pray and read God's Word the Bible. It is up to you as individuals to do this. And what we must realize is that your relationship with God changes because you change- in knowledge with experience and because the spirit in you—that is, what makes you unique, meets God's Spirit in new ways every time you hear and respond to what you are called to do.

Martin Luther had no idea what would happen that evening in October 1517 to the church he loved. If he could fully witness what is occurring today when we know that many people are observing All Saints Day at home or in front of a screen would there have been such a transition to new theological perspectives? We do not know the answer to this. Nor do we know what the rest of this year 2020 will bring or even what is being projected into 2021 as a result of this pandemic. Yet what we do know through faith in God is that when God reveals himself and all of the mysteries of creation, we will be like him for we will see him as he is. So what is essential in this moment is to have faith. Not just a little—yes I believe because I like to celebrate Christmas and Easter and maybe even Halloween, but truly deep down faith which comes from within. A faith that is heart based and lived out through our actions of love our entire life.

All Saints Day reminds us of the heritage of the church first established by Jesus upon Peter. The Christian faith and the establishment of communities of faith spread because people were wanting to hear Good News in Jesus and that through him there was hope. Many believed that Jesus would soon return and / or that no matter what happened in their life, they knew that they would live forever with Jesus. This is highlighted in our reading from Revelation where John's vision involves a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all the tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of God and before Jesus the Lamb. This multitude was robed in white and were waving palm branches. They cried out in a loud voice- "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb."

And we learn who is in this great multitude—they are the ones who came out of the great ordeal we call living on earth. They are the believers in the Jesus the Lamb and they are worshiping always before God. And these multitudes are filled with those who will no longer hunger or thirst, they will not be affected by the sun or heat and it will be that they will be guided by Jesus and they will receive the water of life. This is the hope and promise for all who believe in God and in Jesus Christ as the Spirit leads us to grow and understand our life's purpose.

We give thanks for those unknown to us who led the way of Jesus through the generations of faithful people in our history. We give thanks for those whom we have known

who simply taught us how to love God through telling us the stories of Jesus. And we give thanks for the ability to share our faith with others. Sometimes we fail to do this but God enables us to try again.

On this All Saints Day, let us remember that we too are striving to be saint-like each day that God grants us to live for we all want to be in that multitude which gathers at the throne of grace and worships God- Father, Son and Spirit forevermore.

Let us pray:

God of the ages, we praise you for all your servants who have done justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God. We praise you for all who have sought your new creation and who by their steadfast faith, have shown their discipleship in Christ Jesus.

We praise you for those we have known and loved, and pray that we, with them, may follow in the way of Christ, and, at the last, dwell in your holy city sharing the inheritance of the saints in light, through your son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. (719VU)