

**The Feast of All Saints (Observed), Sunday, November 3, 2024**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

## **Learning to Love the Saints**

Revelation 7:9–17 & Matthew 5:1–12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

---

In the Holy Gospel, Jesus said, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”** (Matt 5:3). And, in Revelation, John sees a great multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Who are those clothed in white robes? **“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”** (Rev 7:14b).

---

As human beings, we have a deep-rooted desire for heroes and authorities. We all want someone to look up to, someone whom we can model our lives after. We want authorities who can offer us wise counsel and direction. Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset described it like this, “We want someone set over us on whom we can depend and whom we can admire—yes, whom we can love.”<sup>i</sup>

I think this need for heroes and authorities explains much of what we see in our culture. The parade of TikTok influencers and YouTube personalities, pop stars and billionaires, athletes and artists, politicians and celebrities. They all offer us an image of the good life, the blessed life. We even know some by a single name: Taylor, Elon, Brady, Shohei. We desire heroes, and our culture is more than willing to provide. Who are yours? (And I’m not just asking the children!) Who do you want to be when you grow up? What do you view as the blessed life?

Our culture has its heroes and its authorities, but we are gathered in the church for All Saints Day. The Church provides a different set of heroes and authorities. We call them “the communion of saints.” We should pay way more attention to the saints and far less attention to our favorite celebrities and athletes. We should pay attention to the saints if what we truly care about is our faith and what it means to be a Christian. Aren’t the saints the ones we would want to ask? Wouldn’t they be the best models and examples for us to follow?

Where do we turn to learn more about the saints? The best place to start is the Bible. Just read it. There you learn about our fathers and mothers in the faith, our heroes, our

authorities—Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary and Joseph, Peter and Paul. Their lives are laid out before you—not just the good things they did, but also their failures and the grace they received from God.

Church history gives us even more saints. Their names may be less familiar—go look them up after hearing their names—people like Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Perpetua and Felicity, Ambrose, Monica, Augustine. Keep on going and you get Patrick, Anselm, Bernard, and later Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, John Gerhard, and even C. F. W. Walther, the founding father of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. How well do you know these saints? Do you know their stories? Which of them do you connect with? Whose life resonates with yours?

Our church has a calendar of feasts and commemorations to honor the saints. We also have some wonderful resources to learn more about them. I'll mention two: [\*The Treasury of Daily Prayer\*](#) and the book [\*Celebrating the Saints\*](#). As we learn about the saints, as we come to know their stories—who they are, what they did, and how God was merciful to them—we learn to see ourselves as part of something much bigger. We are part of a story that embraces history and spans the globe. Learn to see yourself as part of this communion, this fellowship divine—though we feebly struggle, they in glory shine (*LSB* 677). Learn how they endured the trials and crosses of their day, so that you can learn to do the same in this day. Learn to love the saints!

Now we can honor the saints in three ways. The first way we honor the saints is by thanking God for them. Why? Because in them we see examples of His mercy. We also see in them God's will to save. Think of St. Paul, an enemy of God and persecutor of the Church, yet God desired to save him and did save Him. We also see that the saints are God's gifts to the Church—the way they model and teach the faith. The second way we can honor the saints is when our faith is strengthened as we remember them. Think of St. Peter. He denied the Lord three times, yet was restored by the forgiveness of sins. And then, third, we honor the saints by imitating their faith and other virtues. They followed Christ, so we learn from them how to follow Christ, too.

Yet the saints aren't an end in themselves. They're a window into a bigger world—a window to heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We don't just look through the window at them with envy, wishing we could enjoy what they have. We do that with cultural heroes. We hear about their or their prosperity and we envy them. With the saints, we don't do that. Instead we see ourselves surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses as we run with endurance the race set before us (*Heb* 12:1).

It's especially important for us here. Believing Christians aren't on every corner of the street in New England, and many who call themselves Christians have abandoned the Scriptures. It can be a lonely thing to be a Christian here. So we look to the saints and we realize that we're not alone. We're running the race, and they're running alongside of us and in front of us. Where they've reached is where we are headed.

St. John describes having this experience in Revelation 7:9–10: He saw **a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white [baptismal] robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"** You can almost hear their voices now. Their eyes are on the throne, which draws John's eyes to throne, which draws our eyes to throne. With them and through them we see the victorious Lamb—the Lamb who was slain but now stands. Crucified, but now alive forevermore. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

We remember as well those whom we have loved and lost in this life. But we also remember this: Death has lost its sting. And the saints who have died in Christ are with Christ, alive with Christ. They reign with Christ. They are around the throne of Christ. That's where we belong, too.

I said earlier that we often look to our heroes and authorities for a picture of the blessed life. What is the blessed life? We would describe it as the life the saints have in heaven. But we should also view it as the life that saints have here on earth. The world has a false expectation of what it means to be blessed. The world's beatitudes go like this: "Blessed are the wealthy. Blessed are the beautiful. Blessed are the PhDs. Blessed are those with good genes and great health."

But that's not how our Lord's beatitudes go. He says: **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"** (Matthew 5:3–12).

Blessed are you when you are persecuted! That's not what the world calls blessed, but it's what Christ calls blessed. When you hear this list—the poor in spirit, mourning over sin, meek, and so on—who is being described here? Certainly we could identify some of the saints. Even more, this is a description of our Lord Jesus Christ. He's the one who is poor in spirit, who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He's the merciful one, pure in heart, and a peacemaker. He's the one persecuted for righteousness' sake and reviled. He's the Christ whom God has sent, our Lord Jesus Christ, the blessed One. Blessed, even though He's crucified, for on the third day the Father raised Him from the dead, victor over sin, death, and the devil.

He's the blessed One. His righteousness is what we seek, what we pursue. So in Christ, as you are—baptized into Christ, communing with Christ, having Christ's word put into your ears and His absolution covering you—in Christ this is what it looks like to live as a baptized child of God. We are the blessed ones.

Jesus talks about blessedness in a number of places. In the Gospels, He tells the friends of John the Baptist: **"Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me"** (Matthew 11:6). When Peter confesses Jesus to be the Son of the Living God, Jesus says, **"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah"** (Matthew 16:17). Though Peter is offended by Jesus saying that He must suffer and die, He will—He will suffer and die for us and for all the saints. In Revelation, it says, **"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord"** (Revelation 14:13). It doesn't say, "Blessed are those who die with wealth or those who die after a long life or those who die having accomplished this in this world, but **blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.**" **"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb"** (Revelation 19:9). **"Blessed are those who have washed their robes"** and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 22:14). In other words, blessed are those who look to Christ. And blessed are they, even if they suffer persecution for bearing His name. Blessed here means to be saved and redeemed, so that means you.

You are a blessed one in Jesus Christ. You look to Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead. You already raise your voice in praise to the One who is on the throne and to the Lamb.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, **"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."** This is an amazing status that we've been given, an amazing title that's been placed on you: child of God. St. John goes on to say: **"We are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared."** Already His child, but you don't appear yet as you will when He comes again. **"We know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see**

**Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure** (1 John 3:1–3).

We gather today, surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses, with eyes on the Lamb who reigns. We gather as those who hunger and thirst for this kind of life, for the righteousness of Christ. And it's His righteousness that He gives you this day and invite you into. You are a blessed one, dear brother, dear sister, and you've been called to lead the blessed life, as one who has your sins forgiven in Christ, as one who has the saints as your brothers and sisters, as one who has that vision John saw as your future: standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

There are other saints as well. Just look around you. Right now and right here. Not only in heaven, but here on earth you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. You are surrounded by saints—saints not because they lead holy lives in-and-of themselves or because they are perfectly sanctified here. You are surrounded by saints who are made holy in Christ. You have brothers and sisters right here. God has both given them to serve you and has called you to love and serve them as well. So God would use you and your works for those around you.

That described here. Today you're being called and invited into the life of Christ—the life of being poor in spirit, mourning over sin, being meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Strive to be one who is pure in heart and a peacemaker. Be willing to endure persecution for righteousness' sake. Good works flow from being this blessed one in Christ. And these good works flow from us for our neighbors.

You can say today with St. Paul because of your baptism: **“It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”** (Galatians 2:20). Christ lives in you. Christ is at work in you. Christ makes you blessed. He surrounds you with a whole company of saints in heaven and on earth. Love the saints. Love the saints because you have been loved by Christ, who gave His own blood for you that your robes might be washed white by Him.

In some ways the Christian life is such an ordinary life. When we think of the heroes and authorities of our culture, they're people who make the headlines, who are on the news, who appear on TV. But to be Christian saints isn't to have the focus put on you and it's not about accomplishing great things in the eyes of the world. The life of a Christian saint is an ordinary life, an everyday life, a life lived in the calling that God has given you here, though no one else notices or sees.

Marvel over the saints sitting next to you and marvel over the incredible work that God does through them. In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes a bus journey to

heaven. While there, he's introduced to one of the most amazing saints of all. He sees this woman coming toward him. He's amazed by her beauty. He begins to ask, "Is it so-and-so?" meaning someone famous and well-known. He's told: "It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green." She is one of the great ones. He goes on to say that fame in heaven is different from fame on earth. A simple, ordinary woman who was loved by Jesus, and so who loved others in return. She carried her earthly life out not seeking renown or celebrating, but simply doing what God had given her to do. That was a saint. You are a saint. You are surrounded by saints here. And you are surrounded by saints in heaven.

Love the saints, even as you've been loved by Him, as we all press on, running the race with enduring, looking ahead to the golden evening that brightens in the west, for soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest.

---

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

---

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2024/11/on-the-centenary-of-sigrid-undsets-conversion>