

Revelation 7:9-17

9 After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out with a loud voice:

“Victory belongs to our God
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

11 All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, 12 saying,

“Amen! Blessing and glory
and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might
be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

13 Then one of the elders said to me, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?”

14 I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

Then he said to me, “These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood. 15 This is the reason they are before God’s throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, 17 because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water,[a] and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Psalms 34

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be in my mouth.

2 I praise the Lord—
let the suffering listen and rejoice.

3 Magnify the Lord with me!
Together let us lift his name up high!

4 I sought the Lord and he answered me.
He delivered me from all my fears.

5 Those who look to God will shine;
their faces are never ashamed.

6 This suffering person cried out:
the Lord listened and saved him from every trouble.

7 On every side, the Lord’s messenger protects those who honor God; and he delivers them.

8 Taste and see how good the Lord is!

The one who takes refuge in him is truly happy!
9 You who are the Lord's holy ones, honor him,
because those who honor him don't lack a thing.
10 Even strong young lions go without and get hungry,
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.
22 The Lord saves his servants' lives;
all those who take refuge in him
won't be held responsible for anything.

1 John 3

See what kind of love the Father has given to us in that we should be called God's children, and that is what we are! Because the world didn't recognize him, it doesn't recognize us.

2 Dear friends, now we are God's children, and it hasn't yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we'll see him as he is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself even as he is pure.

Matthew 5

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. 2 He taught them, saying:

3 "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

4 "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

5 "Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

6 "Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

7 "Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

8 "Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

9 "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

10 "Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

11 "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. 12 Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Sermon

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.

Lord, open our hearts and our lives will sing out your name. Amen.

For ALL the saints. I love that song. It's one of those that quickens my heartbeat and brings a tear to my eye. We're going to sing it soon, I imagine with the kind of gusto that goes with a beloved tune on a memorable festival where we give thanks for all our forebears in faith who rest from their labors. But before we sing it, we need to ask a question: do we truly mean all?

Just think about it. There's a crowd that no one can count with people from every nation, persons from every tribe, members of every nation, and speakers of every language. All those saints, standing before God's throne, singing that familiar song: Blessing and honor and glory and might be to God and the Lamb! Forever! Amen! That's our song. And it's their song. Not just the people we imagine belong in the quire, but the people with terrible voices,

literally and figuratively. So who are the saints we can't imagine singing this song?

There's the unassuming saints, the ones who make precious little impression, whether saintly or otherwise. It's not that we consider them unsaintly. We just don't remember them well enough to be thankful for them. Why we don't remember these people, however, is more often a problem with us than it is with them. The humble, meek, and hopeless people often don't make a big impact in our lives, but they're certainly saints.

There's the abrasive saints, the one's whose presence you can't ignore no matter how fast you run down the other aisle when you see them at the grocery store. There's nothing wrong with them, except everything they do rubs you the wrong way. The way they chew their gum. The way they beg for money or a meal. The way they whistle with contentment. The way they style their hair. Maybe they just seem too good to be true. But the humble,

hungry, and pure people seem unrealistic in our lives, but they're certainly saints.

There's the offensive saints, the one's whose language you find vulgar, whose behavior you find distasteful, who don't just irritate you, but challenge your commitment to love because you can't imagine their behavior as a part of the church or their identity as reflective of God's image in the world. The ones who cry for peace in the midst of a country's penchant for war, the one's persecuted because they just don't fit in. The ones we insult and harass because, well, we don't know, other than we feel they deserve it. Yes, they're saints as well.

This week on campus, one of our newer students in campus ministry asked an important question: is it possible to appreciate something that someone created, even if that person is morally suspect, or worse, ethically reprehensible? In other words, what do we do with Martin Luther's beneficial theology in light of his

antisemitism? How do we view Martin Luther King Jr.'s fantastic Civil Rights legacy in light of his infidelity? Should we still eat Chick-fil-a in light of their owner's homophobic policies? How do we deal with those saints who are so obviously sinners?

It's a good question, because let's be honest: Chick-fil-a makes great chicken. MLK led a beautiful revolution in American civil life. Martin Luther kickstarted the wonderful reform the church so desperately needed around the free gift of God's salvation that we find in the Gospel. People with deep flaws can produce wonderful things. Now, that doesn't redeem the person's behavior. As I told this student, sometimes this means we avoid buying good chicken to be in solidarity with with our LGBTQ+ siblings. When we talk about our theological and political forebears, sometimes this means noting not just their positive contributions but the negative impacts of their words and behavior.

That's the thing about saints. They're sinners. Everyone one of them. Every one of us. On All Saints Day, we celebrate God's perfect work through imperfect people. We don't elevate people onto pedestals, somehow making idols out of God's creatures. Instead, we give thanks for how God chooses to work wonderfully through the broken vessels that we are. As we acknowledge those who died this year, along with our ancestors long past, we shouldn't just recall rosy memories, but the fullness of who they are as people. Speaking true of the dead is not speaking ill of the dead. Rather, it's an honest assessment of our human condition that allows us to celebrate God's miraculous ability to work the good through even us. Part of the all saints festival is this honest assessment of our life in Christ: no saint is perfect, so we're not here to worship people. Instead, we're here to worship God and give thanks for God's work and the people through whom God does that work.

Another part of the All Saints' Festival opportunity is to reflect on not just those who come to mind as saints, but to bring to mind those saints who we might easily forget. Blessed are the meek: children lost to miscarriage, seniors who die alone in nursing homes, refugees who perish as they brave harsh deserts and rough waters to flee oppression. Blessed are those who grieve: those suffering from depression, victims of harassment or assault, the divorcee who never wanted the marriage to end. Blessed are the humble: those who've made our lives better without making their presence known, those who've enriched our world without demanding riches in return. Blessed are the hungry: those who beg for some sort of sustenance on the side of the road and those who appear just fine but suffer from food insecurity in their own homes. Blessed are those who suffer insults: people facing eating disorders and body image issues. Those oppressed for their skin color, their sexuality, their gender, their age, or their ability.

Blessed are those who face harassment or persecution. Even when we're the harassers. Even when we're the persecutors.

All Saints also provides us with the incomparable opportunity to restore to prominence the saints that we've ignored as a church. Saints like Junia and Thecla, two early women who in the Bible (for Junia) and in other early Christian documents (for Thecla) receive the titles of apostles. That's right, there's evidence that suggests women were preaching and performing sacraments along with the male disciples of Christ in the 1st century. Though we've scrubbed that from our memory - even to the point of destroying icons and mosaics that depict these women as authoritative - All Saints encourages us to recapture the history of Junia and Thecla. We can lift up the stories of Jehu Jones, the first black Lutheran Pastor ordained in 1832, Elizabeth Platz, the first female Lutheran Pastor ordained in 1970. There are stories of saints that we don't even know that have reshaped the landscape in which we live, that have

brightened and enlightened our world with the knowledge of Christ. We're forever indebted to these saints. To all the saints.

As we prepare to sing for all the saints, let's take a moment to reflect on the saints that we know have passed us by this year, to remember the ancestors who shaped our faith in profound ways. Let's also think hard about the saints we don't notice, or don't know, or don't acknowledge their God-given sainthood because of roadblocks in our own lives. When we sing, bring to mind not just those that you love, but those that you struggle to love, as saints of God. For this day, we give thanks for a God who works through all kinds of people, with all kinds of baggage, with one singular purpose: to make all of us desperate sinners divine saints. Amen.