

Sunday November 2nd 2014

Readings

Revelation 7:9-17

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. **10** They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" **11** And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, **12** singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." **13** Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" **14** I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. **15** For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. **16** They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; **17** for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. **2** My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. **3** O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together. **4** I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. **5** Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. **6** This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble. **7** The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. **8** O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. **9** O fear the Lord, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. **10** The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. (**11** Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. **12** Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good? **13** Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. **14** Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. **15** The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry. **16** The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth. **17** When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. **18** The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. **19** Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all. **20** He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken. **21** Evil brings death to the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned.) **22** The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

1 John 3:1-3

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. **3** And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Matthew 5:1-12

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. **2** Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: **3** "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **4** "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. **5**"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. **6** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. **7** "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. **8**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. **9** "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. **10** "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **11** "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Seven verses. SEVEN. I mean, we all love “For All the Saints,” but c'mon pastor. SEVEN VERSES! Isn't four enough?

Sometimes, as a pastor, we make decisions that humble ourselves, that help to remind us where we stand as preachers and leaders in the church. Today we sang all seven verses – which, by my math, took less than three and a half minutes – because sometimes music can communicate theology better than the sermon. You see, we're all called to proclaim the Gospel with our gifts. Preaching is not

the only Gospel proclamation. We experience the Gospel through hymns. Through visual art from people like Kendall and poetry through people like Clyde and music through people like Rosemary and Erica. We experience the Gospel through service like we find in Lee and Judy's faithful renovation of the nursery. Each of us, in the gifts and work that God has given us, proclaims the Gospel.

And even in the liturgy, each portion communicates the Gospel. Here, on All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for William How, who wrote this hymn in the 19th century, and embedded within it an incredibly theology of the church: that though we are separated by death, we are united by Christ in that blest communion. In the Holy Spirit, we share a

divine fellowship with the entire church, whether those gone on before us or those yet to come. We're even united today with William, who though he wrote this hymn two centuries ago, is yet still teaching us about the nature of the church. That is an incredible gift, in seven verses, and one that we celebrate today.

It is vital to do things like this, to practice remembering the saints that came before us. We gather today to give thanks for the entire church even as we still grieve for those who've died before us. But this hymn helps us to remember that, even as we mourn, the saints gone on before us now revel in the joyous presence of God, now meet Christ face to face.

Another reason we celebrate All Saints is because we each have gifts, given to us by God, gifts for which we are thankful, gifts for proclaiming the Gospel. We gather to recall that God works through all of us, from pastors to factory workers, from business professionals to food service staff, from the unemployed to the homemaker. All of us are sinners made saints by God's grace, and so today, we give thanks that God renews us, that God promises to give us gifts to proclaim the good news of the Gospel.

And what an incredible promise this is! John's first letter puts it this way: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been

revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." What goodness! What gift! That we are children of God – we imperfect creatures, we fallible persons – we are made children of the perfect God, of the infallible Lord.

Part of the beauty of All Saints is that we are reminded we are simultaneously sinners and saints. We are reminded that none of us is perfect, and yet all of us are loved. Loved not only by God, but as we join together and celebrate the goodness of the sinner-saints across time and space, we also affirm our love for one another.

And gosh, that's hard sometimes. It's hard to love people. Not just others, but ourselves too. We hear

the words from Revelation, and they seem pretty unbelievable. Incredible unity for people from every nation. Immaculate love between people of every tribe and tongue. Yet, a people desperately devoted to Christ Jesus, and so deeply connected to one another. This is a difficult reality to imagine.

On All Saints, we come face to face with that difficulty. Revelation even talks about the church triumphant as recently delivered from a great ordeal, a struggle, a strife. The Holy Spirit works in incredible ways, because tonight we join together for a play to consider one of the great ordeals of the church. All Saints Sunday is always the week after Reformation Sunday, but it is not every year that we have a drama scheduled that explores the theme of church

unity within the Reformation context. Tonight we have the opportunity to come together and consider the realities of unity and division amongst the saints.

And we give thanks for that, especially because we know here and now that there are plenty of ordeals that we face in our daily lives as a church, some of them significant and some minute. Living with people is difficult. Loving people is even more difficult. We are limited creatures, and sin even further inhibits our ability to love one another as we ought to love. We know this. We get frustrated with our own struggles, and then project that frustration onto others who struggle themselves.

But as we come together – as we're bound together in the cross of Christ – we come to see that

each of us has gifts to offer, that each of us represents Christ to the world. All of the saints, every last one of us, are literally re-presentations of Jesus that help to show the world what a Creator's love looks like.

What does this all mean? What are we getting at here? The beauty of All Saints is that, in the midst of our brokenness, we benefit from one another's beauty. Despite our human limits, despite our frailty, despite our sinfulness, God works for the Gospel in and through us. How blessed are we to have with us someone like Jimmy, who not only faithfully takes up our offering every Sunday, but is by far our chief evangelist, constantly bringing people who want to be a part of this community. That is an image of God

to us, Christ's hospitality offered within the church and experienced as we welcome people like Benny and Joyce. This is the Gospel, seen through one of our beloved members. And each of us has this within us, something to make the community more vibrant, more faithful, more Christ like. Every last one of us. All the saints.

Today, as we name the names of the loved ones we lost this year, we name them as sinners and saints, as imperfect humans made perfectly like Christ. As ones who are broken and yet whose beauty showed us Jesus. This is the legacy of the church. We are cracked vessels that carry the invaluable treasure of the Gospel. All saints are this way.

This provides us some guidance as we consider how to grow as a church in the 21st century. Christians everywhere struggle to figure out who God calls us to love, who God calls us to welcome into our communities, who God calls us to call sister and brother. And this has only gotten more difficult as the church becomes increasingly discounted in our present society. Postmodernity, this emerging culture that seems to marginalize the church, seems to put us near the brink of disaster. So can we really embrace all the sinners? Can we really love all the saints?

We can. We must. All Saints is a reminder that God loves us enough to unite us all into the heavenly body, to make us all citizens of the Kingdom of God. We must get beyond ourselves and learn to love

those who aren't like us, learn to work with those who make us uncomfortable. Remember that Saint Francis, once profoundly wealthy, gave up his inheritance and instead chose poverty to love those who society despised. Remember that Mother Teresa risked her own wellness to minister to the sick in Calcutta. Remember that sainthood is about giving up our comfort for the cross of Jesus Christ.

For us, here in Radford, we are not called to be comfortable. We are called to be as compassionate as the Holy Spirit who gave us life. We are not called to be insular. We are called to be as inclusive as the Father who welcomes home the prodigal children across the ages. We are not called to live for ourselves, but like that heavenly host in Revelation,

we are called to live life for Christ, to become mirror images of the Lamb at the center of the throne who is our shepherd, to become radically obedient to Christ our sacrifice who guides us to springs of the water of life.

This is difficult. It has always been difficult for the saints, because we are yet sinners. And still Christ died for us. To be these sinner-saints is not an option. It's not a secondary part of our existence. It is the very struggle in which God brings life out of our deaths. And as we face this struggle, just as the saints before us, God who wiped away every tear from their eyes, will wipe away our tears as well.

It is All Saints Sunday. Let's join together with all of them. Every last one. Even if they make us

uncomfortable, because what is more
uncomfortable than the death on a cross that made
us saints in the first place? Amen.