

"Saints, Now and Then"

Text: 1 John 3:1-3

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – that same undeserved love that has turned countless sinners into the Communion of Saints – may that same grace be multiplied to each one of you, together with the loving care of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Fellow Saints:

Suppose I was to tell you that right now, as I look out through the back windows of the church and into the parking lot, I can see a guy in a ski mask with a tire iron breaking windows and going through your vehicles. What would you do? Given the fact that we are residents of the old Dakota Territory, I'm pretty sure I know the answer. Calling the police would probably come as sort of an afterthought. Suffice it to say you would not sit idly by while the hooded hooligan carried off your belongings.

And yet we are in danger of doing just that in connection with something infinitely more valuable than whatever you have in your cars – the celebration of All Saints Day. How, why, would we allow something so valuable to be stolen? The first answer would probably be that we are losing our appreciation for the value of the day, and the second would be that we downplay its significance and value because others have tainted or even spoiled the event.

Yet that's not how Christians do things, is it. We still commemorate Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and the Reformation – all despite the fact that our society has permanently tainted those worthy celebrations. We do so by paring away the rot, as best we can, and then by celebrating what is still good and God-pleasing.

Why not then All Saints Day? This too is a holiday in the Christian Church, but it is a long-neglected holiday. Why? Again, man has perverted the good, God-pleasing celebration, replacing it with a nonsensical adoration of man rather than God. This time, however, there was a twist. This time the perversion came not from our Godless society; this time it came from within the confines of the Christian Church itself.

So it is that we are tempted to skip this event, and to pass right from Reformation to Thanksgiving. Is that wise? Is that the will of our God - that we allow the celebration of All Saints Day to be swept into the dustbin of history? It is hard to imagine that such could be the case. Our God wants us to avoid what is bad, certainly, but he also wants us to cling to what is

good – and there is much that is good here. The key to a God-pleasing celebration is always the focus and direction of the heart. Only when the focus or direction of any such celebration is upon our God, rather than upon any part of his creation, only then will our God be pleased.

With this then we turn to a study and celebration of this event, All Saints Day, and therein a celebration of the grace of our God and of the rare privileges that are ours when we are tied by faith to that God. The text that will guide us is part of God's verbally inspired Word found recorded in John's First Epistle, beginning with the first verse:

ESV 1 John 3:1-3 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

These are God's words. Think of it. The very words of God, recorded and preserved down through the ages so that we also, on this day, might hear and learn from them. That these words would have God's desired effect in our hearts, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

So then, All Saint's Day has been almost irreparably sullied by those folks who imagine that forgiveness can be gained by praying to a list of certain dead people. So the question is this: *Do we do more damage than good by celebrating what has been so thoroughly perverted?* The clear answer is that our All Saints celebration is well worth the salvage effort. The reason is both straightforward and simple: the commemoration is worth it because our God is worth it.

Remember, God is supposed to be the focal point for this and every other holiday. He is to be the center or heart of all that we do. Consider how we end each Lord's Prayer: "**...For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.**" Those are not just words; they are facts. The words rightly say "*For thine IS...*" not "*should be...*" Nor are they exaggerations. They are actually *understated* truths. They are *understated* in that mortal human beings really cannot fully comprehend just how worthy our immortal God is of our praise and adoration in absolutely every aspect of life. Since "**every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...**" it is then also true that that same God is

worthy of thanksgiving, praise, and honor for an infinite number of big and little things in our lives every single day.

Why should All Saint's Day be any different? On this day we sing the praises of our God for the grace given to all the believers who have been brought to, preserved, and carried home in the one true, saving faith. Think for just a moment about how precious and commendable such a celebration really is. Once you get past the notion that a saint is a human being with more good works than sins (every believer, by the way, is sinless in God's sight through faith in Jesus Christ) and once you remember that this celebration is directed towards God rather than man, nothing could be more natural than to celebrate God's victories in saved sinners.

In fact we do ourselves a great disservice when we fail to make a big deal about the rescue of even *one sinner*. Why is this such a great disservice? Because it *is* a big deal. Every single Christian who dies in the faith is an eternal victory over humanly insurmountable odds.

Are you having trouble grasping the magnitude of the victory of every saved sinner? Think about it in these terms. Every single one of us started our lives as a spiritual failure. The deck, as it were, was stacked against us. We had lost before we even started because we were born **"dead in trespasses and sins."** In fact this is one of the clearest truths taught in Scripture. We could never keep God's command to be holy because we were *born* sinful. Even the youngest child here this morning was born **"dead in trespasses and sins."** Hardly seems fair, does it? We also understand that human beings have added a never-ending supply of sins to those with which we were born. Original (birth) sin sealed our doom before we even took our first breath, but every one of us did more than enough to condemn ourselves even without original sin. Still God rescued us.

What is even more remarkable about the salvation of any sinner has to do with the enemies we face. How can any human being possibly do battle against an enemy that we can't even see. Even worse, apart from Jesus Christ, we don't even have any weapons that could possibly be effective in such a struggle. Even *worse yet* is the fact that this unseen, indefensible enemy has a traitorous ally that remains inside every human being - our own sinful flesh. In other words, there is a part of each one of us that sides with our mortal enemy, and every inclination of that old Adam in us works toward our own eternal destruction.

Makes one wonder how things could get any worse. They can, since we also acknowledge a total inability for any sinner to choose the right path to heaven. Add to that the fact that there is only one path – through faith in Jesus Christ – together with the fact that *someone else* has to show us that path (we cannot find it on our own) and then the Holy Spirit has to work through that message of salvation to bring us to faith. All that, and that's just the start. From that point on, and every single day of our lives, the devil and his allies will try to rob us of the saving faith that we have been given. If we had no one but ourselves to stand guard, the fortress of our human hearts would certainly and quickly fall.

How in the world then can anyone at all ever be brought to faith, let alone kept or preserved in that faith? ***Thanks be to God, who gives us such a victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*** Only God could do something that great, which is why our God most certainly is worthy of eternal praise, honor, and glory for every single sinner he rescues from an eternity in hell and blesses instead with immortality in heaven.

Society is terminally clueless as to how or why anyone is saved. The most common idea is that God judges a human being's relative goodness and allows into his heaven all that are "good." Yet the Bible calls God the Father a *judge* for a reason. To correctly dispense justice, even a secular judge cannot just set aside the law; he is sworn to uphold it. So too God the Father cannot simply overlook the transgressions of sinners and reward them with heaven for "doing their best" or some such silliness. No one is rewarded with heaven for being a "good guy." Every sin demands payment, and here there are only two options: you pay the eternal death penalty for every single sin, or the debt is charged to Jesus Christ. That is why it is well said that the only sin that damns is unbelief. Unbelief is a rejection of Jesus and his gift of salvation. It is a personal denial that Jesus did what he said he did – and it is therefore an eternal death-sentence.

For this reason the notion that God will offer free general admission to heaven on Judgment Day to anyone who does *not* believe in Jesus Christ is simply wrong. Damnably wrong. Eternally wrong. It is not only impossible, the very thought that it *is* possible can and does wreak havoc with a naïve, unbelieving world. Divine justice would not, could not, allow it. The one who believes will certainly be saved, but the one who does *not* believe will just as certainly be condemned, no matter how socially good that individual seems on the outside.

Given all of this, we truly stand in awe of the miracle that God has worked in every Christian – both bringing us to faith and in keeping us in the faith until the very end of our lives on earth. How fitting and proper, therefore, to set aside a day – or at least a worship service – to marvel at the goodness of our God and sing his praise for souls delivered from the eternal torments of hell.

Here is where our text comes into play, as well as the simple theme for this morning: "Saints, Now and Then."

How then could any of us, foul creatures that we all are, ever be admitted into such a perfect, holy place as God's heaven? The answer begins here in time – right *now*. **See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.** Our first Scripture reading from the Book of Revelation introduces all believers with these words: **"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. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence."** That's you and me, along with every single sinner who has died with saving faith in his or her heart. That's the Holy Christian Church – the very bride of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. But that's not only then, it's now. Right now, at this very moment, you and I also stand before a perfect, holy God as sinless and pure, having been cleansed by Jesus himself – by the blood he shed for us on the cross when he paid for our sins. How can blood be used to wash anything? The filth we had was spiritual; it was the corruption of sin, and as John also tells us earlier in this same Epistle **"the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin."** (1 John 1:7)

There's still more cause for celebration. While we have *now* been washed clean and given life, there will be still more *then*. I'm really not a big "make-over" guy (obviously) but this is something different. At the resurrection of the dead, every single member of the communion of saints gets the ultimate make-over. Everything bad, cumbersome, unclean, or undesirable in any way is removed forever, and we are left with holy, glorified bodies – forever. Pain, sorrow, death, decay – gone, eternally. Joy, comfort, security, immortality – ours for all eternity. So says our text: **Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.**

Our God has done this for us. Now we stand holy and sinless in his sight. *Then*, we will personally experience the incredible, utterly amazing transformation of all who leave this life in faith. Countless thousands have

already been rescued, and are now asleep in the perfect comfort of their Lord's enfolded arms, awaiting the *then*. You know and love many of them. Will you be among them? With Jesus as your Savior, you need have no doubt. With faith in Jesus as your Savior, your place too has been secured. God grant that we learn to appreciate our privileged place among the Communion of Saints, now and then, and to live our lives in the pure joy of who and what, by God's grace, we are. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Revelation 7:9-17** After this I looked, and behold, 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 robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing 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 saying, "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, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "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. ¹⁵ "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

^{ESV} **Matthew 5:1-12** Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he opened his mouth 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 shall be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ ¶ "Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mark Johnson, President Angela Pfennig, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor

All Saints – November 15, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 467 (Verses 1-4 & 7) (Red Hymnal)

"Built on the Rock the Church doth Stand"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Revelation 7:9-17) How tragically ironic that being known by the One True God means that we are unknown by the world. One day, all will be revealed and the truth will be irrefutable and obvious. The visions revealed to John and recorded in the Book of Revelation are intended to give Christians of all times and cultures the comfort of knowing that, no matter how dark and foreboding, and no matter how powerful the forces of evil and unbelief, God's Children win in the end. The prize is heaven. God preserve us to that end.

Psalm 84 (Supplement page 38)

The Gospel Lesson: (Matthew 5:1-12) A saint is rightly defined as one who has no sin in God's eyes. All Christians are therefore saints, since God has placed all of our sins on Jesus and therefore sees them no more. Yet there are other characteristics of God's children of which we ought to be aware. Several were outlined by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 463 (Verses 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest"

The Sermon – Text: 1 John 3:1-3 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"Saints, Now and Then"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 463 (Verses 6-8) (Red Hymnal)

"For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 466 (Stanzas 1 & 4) (Red Hymnal)

"Christ, Thou Art the Sure Foundation"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday () Average (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:15 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Terry Stringer has passed the first phase of his colloquy with the CLC Board of Doctrine and has been declared eligible for guest preaching and vacancy work in the CLC. Pastor Johnathan Schnose has accepted the call to serve as resident vacancy pastor of Bethel of Morris. Nominations are currently being accepted to fill the upcoming vacancy on the faculty of Immanuel Lutheran College. Please see Pastor Roehl if you would like to nominate someone for this position.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning following the service. One of the agenda items to be discussed is how to proceed with services and classes going forward. As it stands, our intention is to return to our regular (full) schedule beginning this Wednesday. If you have thoughts on the subjects, please share them with a Council member prior to the meeting.

Usher/Cleaning List – The 2021 Usher & Cleaning is being updated for presentation at the Annual Voters Meeting. Please review the current draft and let Secretary Phil Pfennig know of any changes that need to be made.

Church Website – The Church website has been overhauled. Our thanks to CLC member Frank Radichel, and his daughter Annette, for the extensive work they did on this project, in willing service to their Lord. Please take some time this week to look through the new site and let Pastor Roehl know of any additions or changes that need to be made.