



All Saints' Day / A  
*God At Work In Our Midst*  
November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Today, as we do on every first Sunday in November, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, one of the seven Principal Feasts in the life of the Church. All Saints' is a day when we recall the enduring faithfulness of the departed saints of God, both those who are well-known and honored with their own feast day, as well as the unknown and unrecognized, those known only to God. It is the day when we celebrate the fact that, somehow, mysteriously, sacramentally, we are united and bound together with them across time and space and context, by virtue of our common spiritual heritage.

Images and similes abound in attempts to depict or describe the theological richness of this day's celebration. Examples are many. For some, ruminating on All Saints' is like reflecting upon a family tree, filled with discrete personalities, each living into their respective lives and callings, and yet forever bound by our shared histories, customs, and relationships. For others, All Saints' is more like a patchwork quilt, fashioned from unique swatches carefully stitched together over time, yielding an exquisitely singular source of warmth and comfort and home. For still others, All Saints' is like a team, comprised of participants from diverse backgrounds who play their respective and equally important roles, all joining together and working toward a common goal – the ushering in and fulfillment of God's Kingdom here on earth.

None of these images is completely satisfactory or exhaustive, however. Over time and season, each one – along with many others - bears fruit to be savored and appreciated. Each example and explanation helps us turn the prism, so to speak, and glimpse a different angle of this mystery. Each ushers us more deeply into the mysterious and unexplainable or fully understood reality of being "knit together" with the whole company of the faithful, even those who are no longer with us and who now worship God on another shore and in a greater light.

All Saints' is a day saturated with depth of meaning because it is a day saturated with stories, begging to be dusted off, read and reread. These stories are chock full of curious and complex

characters who have been blinded or startled or warmed or provoked by God's unlimited grace and unconditional love – each noteworthy in their own regard. And yet, for all their diversity, these stories share a common foundation, supported and strengthened by the same divine love.

Over the centuries, the Church has identified the lives of the saints as tangible expressions of the beatitudes – individuals who were poor in spirit, some who mourned, others who hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and still more who pursued peace. And there are those who were persecuted – and sometimes martyred – because of their faith and belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. So, it is fitting that our Gospel text on this All Saints' Day is from the first portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a section concerned with the well-known and beloved beatitudes.

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most studied and scrutinized of Jesus' teachings, likely due to it being his longest sustained discourse in all of the New Testament. In the intervening centuries, individuals from every background and vocation have pored over the sermon's words and phrases, searching for moral guidance, scholarly revelation, and spiritual insight for their lives of faith. Much ink has been spilled in efforts to extract every bit of nuance and significance and meaning and application from Jesus' words.

Although Jesus uttered these words twenty centuries ago and half a world away, they still demand our attention and study and reflection and prayers, still must be digested steadily and slowly and repeatedly, as each of us seek to discern the unique and individual way God would have us to go. But if you chew long enough, carry this or that statement from Jesus to what appears its logical conclusion, you are bound to find some less than appetizing parts, some bits that are tough to swallow.

One of the challenges in sitting with and contemplating the list of the beatitudes — and there are many — is that they can quickly embarrass even our most well-intentioned pursuits of holiness and faithful living. For those of us who are not sufficiently poor or persecuted or actively brokering peace, Jesus' teachings can leave us stuck between the rock of apathy and the hard place of shame – just giving up at our obvious inability to climb the moral mountains of faith, or embarrassed at our repeated failures for not consistently embodying the virtues Jesus' sermon on the mountaintop prescribes.

Both of these responses – apathy and shame – can cultivate resentment: whether it be resentment toward the beatitudes themselves, or resentment toward those who have successfully lived in accord with them. Wherever the resentment might fall, either on Jesus' teaching or on those who seem to follow it to a tee, we can be left in a frustrating place. Just what are we to do with this seemingly inaccessible and unattainable morality, on which so much importance is placed?

This question is not lost on the Church. Throughout history, numerous theologians, pastors, and spiritual writers have bumped against it – and continue to do so. Martin Luther, for instance, called the beatitudes a “measuring stick of sin”, revealing just how far each one of us falls woefully short of God's glory, while Jesus beautifully attains what us earthbound folks

cannot. And Luther is just one. There are others who have emphasized the almost-infinite distance between this new teaching and those who strive to be shaped by it.

While many have lamented the beatitudes as too heavenly, too divine, too holy to be of much use to those of us who are earth-bound, there are others who have seen them as Jesus' answer to the age-old question of what constitutes human fulfillment. Jesus is not looking to judge our successes or failures. No, Jesus hopes to see us flourishing and thriving and living into the fullness God intended for each of us at our creation. The beatitudes should not be read as primarily about moral obligation and measures of our sinfulness, but as signposts pointing us toward true happiness and fulfillment. In this way, they mark and define our paths as a people of faith, serving as guideposts and encouragement as we go about our days.

Blessed are those who will inherit both the earth and the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who will be comforted and receive mercy. Blessed are those who will see God. Here are the things that can make you happy, Jesus tells us. Take them in. Cherish them. Let them instill hope, and enliven and direct your steps, as they have done for countless faithful before you. Trust that the Holy Spirit will guide you on your way.

This is precisely what we see over and over in the lives of the saints. We see individuals who, in their humanity were just like us, and who sought the narrow path of poverty, meekness, mercy, and purity. And we name them as deeply fulfilled, as truly happy, blazing a trail before us, opening up this well-worn, narrow way through the forest of debilitating grief or agonizing doubt or social unrest.

This is simply another way of saying that what is so extraordinary about the saints is the myriad ways in which their ordinary lives unfolded, day by grace-filled day. The saints are those for whom God's love has seeped into the cracks and crevices of the human condition to encourage new ways of seeing themselves and the world and God. Recounting and telling the saints' stories are ways not to belittle or embarrass or shame our own piety or morality or attempts at virtuous living, but to repeatedly remind ourselves of how God has worked with and will continue to work with generation after generation in the Church for the fulfillment and elevation of humanity to our God-given, intended holiness and goodness and faithfulness.

It is a deep and beautiful mystery that on this All Saints' Day we count ourselves members of this great family of faith. It is a deep and beautiful mystery that we are invited to find our own stories written among those of martyrs and confessors from millennia past; and to boldly declare that the same thread of divine love that ran through each of them is now running through each of us.

May each one of you receive that as a gift this day. And may we all be given the grace to examine and emulate the glories of the saints, seeing them as honest examples of God at work in our midst – and support and encouragement for the tough task of living this side of heaven.

Amen.