

“All Saints Today”

“Beloved, we are God's children now” (1 John 3:2).

We have a cultural fascination with Halloween. For the last month, store shelves have been turned black and orange, houses decorated with cobwebs and skeletons, and, last night, the streets were filled with fully costumed Trick or Treaters ready to collect candy from anyone who'd offer it. Halloween has definitely found a unique and celebrated place in our culture. And yet, the more crazed we get about Halloween, the more detached we become from Halloween's original meaning. The word “Halloween” is derived from the medieval phrase “Hallows' Even” which referred to the night before “All Hallows' Day.” All Hallows' Day was a festival of the Church when Christian Martyrs were recognized and honored. In fact, in the early Church, Christians would celebrate the anniversary of a Martyr's death by keeping an all-night vigil, and then celebrating Holy Communion over their tomb, or at the place where they were martyred. As the number of Christian Martyrs grew, the Church began to recognize them as a group, rather than individually, and the result was this ancient and sacred festival. Over the years, this festival, which was originally called All Martyrs' Day, came to be known first as All Hallows' Day and then finally, All Saints' Day.

Historically, All Saints' Day has been a festival of great importance for the Christian Church and has been marked with solemn services and huge celebrations. In fact, the reason Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31st was for the exposure his writing would get when everybody came to the All Saints' mass the next day. For the Christian Church, All Saints' Day has always been a big deal, but this sermon is more than a history lesson, and the question that we really need answered is...why does All Saints' Day matter to us *today*?

All Saints' Day has been one of the most misunderstood days in the church year, and one of the reasons for this misunderstanding is a flawed, unbiblical sense of the word “saint.” You see, “saint” means “holy one” and, usually, this title “saint” is often associated with someone who has lived an exemplary moral life, or done an extraordinary good work, and this connotation has created the idea that the designation of “saint” is completely dependent on what good things a person has done. But, if you search the Word of God, it becomes abundantly clear that being a saint can have nothing to do with being good. In fact, according to the clear words we find in Scripture, “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12); and, “We all like sheep have gone astray each to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6); and “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” in God's eyes (Isaiah 64:4).

From our own flaws and failings, we know these extreme statements are true, and so it only goes to reason that by this definition, for us screwed up and sinful people, holiness and righteousness and sainthood are off the table and out of the question. The truth is that, if this is the standard we must reach, then we can never be called “saints” and this superlative title is as unreachable and impossible as taking the name of God Himself...and this is exactly why All Saints' Day matters to us today!

You see the message of this holy day is not just that the Apostles and Martyrs of the Church should be considered saints; or that we should live better lives so that we can achieve our own place among the saints; the message today is that you and I are saints – literally “holy ones” in the eyes of God – solely because of Jesus Christ. The promises of God tell us that this is why He came. That, “For our sake (God) made him who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God” (II Corinthians 5:21); that we might become the children of God; the Holy Ones; the saints; not because we’ve earned our place or made our way, because Christ has done it for us! This was the great Reformation epiphany that came to Luther when he read the words of Romans, and heard for the first time that “the righteousness of God has been made known apart from the law...through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Romans 3:21-22). And these faithful believers are the saints described in our reading from Revelation as the “great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” wearing robes that had been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9). And this is what John meant when he wrote in our epistle reading, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God” (I John 3:1)...that we should be called saints!

In the eyes of God, a saint is nothing more than a forgiven sinner, and God’s message to you on this All Saint’s Day is that you are a forgiven sinner! Traditionally on All Saints’ Day, we remember those who have gone before us into heaven in the last year, and, in just a few minutes, we’ll do this very thing. But we hold these people up, not because of their good deeds or their acts of kindness or their lives of sacrifice, but because they are forgiven sinners, and, in doing this, *we hold up Christ!*

Today is a day on which we honor the only true Saint – the Holy One – who took our sin and claimed, as His own, all the unrighteousness that separated us from the Father, so that we could “be called children of God!” And, our text tells us, that is what we are! (I John 3:1). Brothers and Sisters in Christ, don’t miss these incredible words from John. In these Words, *today* God tells us that we are His; that we are a new creation; and He gives us a promise that purifies us and brings meaning to our everyday lives.

As we celebrate All Saints’ Day there is a subtle temptation to either focus on the lives of those saints from the past, or to look ahead to the sainted life that God has promised us in heaven...but if we only do this – if we use this day to simply dwell on the past or to skip ahead to the future – then we miss the present reality to which we have been called. And that reality is that today, by faith, we are righteous!

You see, John speaks to us today in the present tense. Drawing on the work that Jesus has done on our behalf and clinging to the unconditional promise we have been given in Christ, John tells us that we are God’s children right now! That our lives as saints are happening right now! And that as we live, right now, in the hope that we have been given in Christ, He is purifying us “just as He is pure” (I John 3:3).

As believers in Christ, God has placed us into the world to live out our lives in the present – fully and fiercely as His saints; to make a difference for the Kingdom of God by bearing witness to the hope that we have; by listening to someone struggling with a difficult circumstance; by meeting contempt and hostility with gentleness and respect; and even as we struggle with the reality of our own sin, to live our lives now by the light of what God has declared and promised!

This is the life of a saint, and, by faith in Jesus Christ, today that is what you are. Go with the peace of this promise of God. Amen.

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