

All Saints' Day, transferred Luke 6:20-31
Christ and Grace November 3, 2019
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There are countless descriptions of St. Peter at the pearly gates of heaven, at the check in desk with clipboard in hand, admitting only the righteous ones into heaven. We can all picture that image, and for the most part, we believe it's the saints and not the sinners who get to heaven, who find favor with God.

The Greek word for saint literally means holy ones. Holy ones are those who are blessed, those who live in the grace of God. Today we recall the saints through time who have gone ahead of us to be with God. The Church has a whole calendar of saints, and many of them persevered against all odds, had amazing gifts, deep spiritual lives, or a vision for mission. If we were to compare ourselves to the *famous* saints, most of us would come up short. Many of us would never claim to be saints, and might even have a few misgivings about coming face to face with St. Peter at the gate!

We hear impossible words from Jesus again this week. They go against the grain; they cause us to come up short in surprise because this is not how the world works. And maybe we are not sure we want it to work as Jesus is describing it here. Jesus says those who will inherit the kingdom of God are the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated – today we might translate that into people on welfare, those who come for a free lunch at the Hope Center, the homeless, or immigrants. We might label them as the ones who work the system or the misunderstood, the undeserving or those who have been unjustly treated, the lazy or the ones who suffer from addiction or mental illness. And yet Jesus calls them blessed – saints. Why is that? Simply because God's attention is always focused on those in need, those left behind by the powers that be, those most of us choose to ignore or exclude. We sometimes call this God's preferential treatment of the poor, and God's unfailing concern for the least and the lost of this world fills the pages of Scripture.

And to make sure we hear him, Jesus goes on - not only lifting up the poor and hungry and those who are hated, but also warning those who are rich, full, laughing, or prideful. Woe to you! This was challenging and uncomfortable for his first century followers, and it's hard for us today, as most of us are far better off than the vast majority of the world's population.

Jesus turns upside down our ideas of worthiness and saintliness, reminding us that none of us can fully measure up, check off enough boxes, or win enough accolades. I imagine Jesus knew all too well that we are prone to measure our accomplishments, to judge the failure of others, and that we fear allowing ourselves to become vulnerable and open to the power of God working in our lives. But this passage, and in fact Luke's entire Gospel, make it clear that Jesus cares for the losers, the lost, and the lonely.

On All Saints' Sunday, in particular, we are blessed with an amazing opportunity to admit that we too, are sometimes losers, lost, and lonely. Despite all the outward appearances we construct, we still have insecurities, we still find it hard to love others or ourselves, and we are still destined at the end of all of our best efforts to confess that we are imperfect. We all stand in need of some mercy, in need of the grace of God.

But here's the thing. We cannot understand God's promise of mercy if we have never been weak. We cannot know the power of forgiveness if we have never sinned. We cannot comprehend the gift of new life if we have never been dead in our old life.

Jesus invites us to stretch our imaginations concerning the saints, those persons who are blessed by God. In God's eyes, the saints are not only those spiritual superstars who attain exceptional virtue. They also include people who are at times vulnerable; who have been self-righteous and untrusting. They are the joyous and the grieving, the content and the malcontent, the loving and those who find it difficult to love. The saints include folk like you and me, and even though every one of us comes up short, God's grace is infinite. Thanks be to God!

As we celebrate the feast of All Saints', we are invited to recognize and affirm our communion with all Christians of all times - every gender, ethnicity, race, and economic status, from all times and places; joined together as one Body in Christ, not because of who we are or what we have, not because of what we've done or left undone, but because in Christ, God calls us holy and blessed and has set us apart to be witnesses to God's grace and goodness.

We are set apart at our baptism, marked as Christ's own forever, washed in the water of forgiveness and grace. Do we live our lives without sin? No. But the water of baptism has cleansed us from sin, that we may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior.

As you come forward for communion, you are invited to touch the blessed water in the baptismal font and trace over that original cross on your forehead to remind you that you are marked as a saint, as Christ's own forever; to remind you that you have been forgiven and raised to the new life of grace.

By this promise we are assured that those whom we love but see no longer are in the nearer presence of God and that when our work on earth is done we too will find ourselves there - with the saints in light!

Until then, we are saints in this life; we are holy ones who are blessed and living in the grace of God. We have been given plenty to do in this world, and much of it will not be easy. But by God's promise and with the presence of Christ, we are being sent out to love our enemies and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Amen.