

All Saints Weekend 2023 (RCL/A): What's Up With Saints?  
Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12  
November 4-5, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Last week we talked about Martin Luther and the beginnings of the Reformation. It wasn't a coincidence that he chose October 31<sup>st</sup> as the day to post those 95 theses, 95 points of debate, on the church door that served as the university bulletin board. This way they'd be seen by the throngs of people who would come to worship the next day, November 1<sup>st</sup>, All Saints Day. The people came because it was a holy day of obligation, a solemn **requirement**, and they believed **hell** was the consequence of **not** coming. But I'm guessing they also came because they would have had **favorite** saints whom they'd want to honor and fervently ask to grant their petitions.

In those days there was great emphasis on punishment after death for sins committed during life. That was the belief that drove the sale of indulgences, which supposedly released loved ones from the pains of Purgatory. Jesus was seen as a harsh Judge who was scary to approach. In European cathedrals the left portal of the building was always devoted to the Last Judgment and often showed a huge Jesus looking down accusingly. He seemed to say, "You're not getting away with anything!" So believers went to saints instead, because they were a whole lot less frightening **and**, so it was thought, had power to answer prayers.

The cult of the saints had gotten kind of crazy by Luther's day. The sale of relics was huge and unregulated and filled with scam artists. Every saint's day on the calendar became not just a holy day but a **holiday** and Luther complained that there weren't enough work days left to get any work done! His **biggest** concern, though, was that the people seemed to have forgotten that **the Lord Jesus** is our primary Intercessor before the Father. We read all about that in the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament:

*14-16 Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let’s not let it slip through our fingers. We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.*  
(Hebrews 4:14-16, *The Message*)

Our Father in Heaven sent the Son as a human being precisely so we **wouldn’t** be frightened of Him! A voice from the cloud, fire on a mountaintop, an earthquake, are all quite disembodied, mystical, overwhelming. A flesh-and-blood human being is something, Someone we can at least **begin** to understand.

So are the saints, as in the friends of Jesus who have walked this earth before us and left a legacy of faithfulness, service, joy. Luther railed against the portrayal of **holy** people as **wholly other** than us. A bedrock belief we share is that we **all** are saints and sinners at the same time. We probably feel we qualify as sinner more credibly than we qualify as saint, but the reality is that “we have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), including the folks depicted with halos in religious artwork. It’s also God’s own truth that in holy Baptism we’ve been set apart for God’s purposes, and that’s the definition of **holy: set apart for God.**

We can learn from the famous, great ones of faith. That’s why even in Reformation times there were days on the calendar to remember the 4 evangelists (authors of the Gospels), the 12 apostles, and a few other key Christians. The Augsburg Confession is the most important document of Lutheran belief other than Scripture. It says of the saints:

...the memory of saints may be set before us, that we may follow their faith and good works, according to our calling....<sup>1</sup>

In other words: “Look at this person’s life to see a good example of what Jesus is talking about!” “Read this bio and see what the beatitudes look like in practice!” As time goes on, our list of people on the calendar of saints morphs, changes, grows. Remember the saying, “You may be the only Bible someone reads”? It’s not just those who **wrote** the Gospels who are important! It’s also

those who **live out** the Gospels, who proclaim the Good News of God's love with their deeds and not just their words. The 12 apostles may have been the **first** folks Jesus sent out on a holy mission, but they certainly weren't the **last!** In every moment of the last 2,000 years, in every corner of the world, in every circumstance of life and history, Jesus has sent people out on holy missions. The calendar of commemorations includes mathematicians, composers, artists, nurses, social workers, community organizers, not just pastors, missionaries, teachers, theologians, martyrs. St. Paul wrote letters to "the saints," and their address wasn't a P.O. box in Heaven! He was writing to people who were alive and well, walking this earth in Corinth and Philippi, Greece, in Ephesus and Colossae, Turkey, in Rome, Italy, people who had to work for a living, shop for groceries, raise children, people who enjoyed sports and the arts, people who hated to pay taxes and suffered from sicknesses. People just like us.

In *More Days for Praise*, I found this quote:

Since there are many more Christian saints than the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, this day [All Saints Day] is set aside to honor all of them. Many saints never had their names mentioned beyond a very small circle of friends. Not all saints are alike. Spiritual gifts are as varied as the many interests and abilities that exist in the broad spectrum of people. Some saints have mystical experiences; others do not. Some saints stay busily at work in the world; other saints have neither the energy nor the social skills for that. Many saints have no idea that they are saints. One saint will rediscover the value of tradition, while another saint will open new doors of innovation. Each life has a purpose and fits into God's grand scheme the way plants – an oak or a trillium – grow in the forest.

Bernard Bangley<sup>2</sup>

This line really caught my attention: "**Many saints have no idea that they are saints.**" I'm thinking **most** "saints" nominated for formal sainthood would decline the honor, saying they are **in no way** worthy! After all, we think of humility as a "saintly" quality. BTW: there's a great definition of humility on a physical rehab signboard on Rt. 35: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less."

I love our Lutheran emphasis on us as living saints, inspired by the lives of those who have gone before us, those who loved fully and lived faithfully, soulfully but less-than-perfectly, just like us, folks who **needed** a Savior, **rejoiced** in a Savior, **served** the Savior with whatever gifts God gave them, in whatever circumstances life landed them. “Rejoice in God’s Saints” (ELW 418) is a hymn we’re singing this weekend, and I especially love this stanza:

Rejoice in those saints, unpraised and unknown,  
 who bear someone’s cross, or shoulder their own:  
 they share our complaining, our comforts, our cares:  
 what patience in caring, what courage is theirs!

This weekend of All Saints is also the culmination of our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. The time capsule we’re burying after 10:30 worship will hold memories, including many Moment in Time sheets prepared by members of our faith family. But memories are passed down by storytelling as well as by the written word. Think of Holy Trinity friends who are now part of the Church Triumphant, and who are therefore celebrated this weekend. Please, share a name, share an instance of how an “everyday saint” showed his or her love of Jesus, how they served His Church, or how they reached out to the last, the lost and the least, members of His family, in His name. Our children and youth need to know in whose footsteps they follow, and the beautiful legacy of faith that is theirs! ~~~~~

Perhaps we may say of them as has been said of others, “The only miracles they made were their own lives.”<sup>3</sup> Thank You, Lord, for the gift of them to us. Amen.

<sup>1</sup><https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/of-worship-of-saints/#ac-xxi-0001>).

<sup>2</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 256.

<sup>3</sup>Phyllis McGinley, *Saint-Watching* (NY: Crossroad, 1988), p. 28.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

