

All Saints A (11/5/2017)

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

We are saints in spite of ourselves. Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb, not to us. Through the gift of Holy Baptism, God clothes us in the grace of Christ and sweeps us up into a great communion of saints, children of God in every time and place. Sainthood does not protect us against stumbling and suffering, but unites us in the hope that the love of God is stronger even than death.

Why do you think it is that we're reluctant to mention a person's flaws at his funeral? When was the last time someone stood at a pulpit to give a eulogy and said, "I'll never forget John. He sure had a nasty temper, didn't he?" The word *eulogy* itself reveals what it is we're trying to accomplish when we speak publicly about a person's life. *Eulogy* means "good words." It's as if we're compelled to redeem the deceased person from his imperfections, his complexity, his human nature. Of course, naming his favorable qualities is a means of dignifying him in death and honoring the grief of his loved ones. But, painting the deceased in exclusively saintly terms isn't entirely honest, is it? It doesn't tell the whole story.

This is why my favorite moment in the funeral liturgy is the commendation, the final pastoral act prior to the dismissal. It's an occasion for telling the truth:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant John. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.¹

¹ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Assembly Edition, 283.

John is a saint, yes, but not on account of all the nice things we say about him and the unflattering things we decline to say. John is a saint because God has made him God's own in spite of his imperfections, promising to love him through his triumphs and failures, through joy and pain, until surrendering to death, John finally comes to rest in the fullness of God's presence.

“Salvation belongs to our God... and to the Lamb!” the masses of the redeemed cry out in the prophetic vision depicted in our first reading from Revelation. In other words, salvation does not belong to us; our ultimate destiny does not depend on our own merit. On All Saints, we rejoice that we, too, are sheep of God's own fold, lambs of God's own flock, and sinners of God's own redeeming. **On All Saints, we celebrate that we are saints in spite of ourselves.**

What, then, makes a saint? Our Revelation text presents us with a wealth of symbols to help make sense of sainthood. A sprawling multitude too numerous to count – saints “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” – are gathered around God's throne clutching palm branches. They burst into song, singing a refrain that we echo in our own canticle of praise every Sunday: “Blessing and honor and glory and might be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen!”² The euphoric crowd is clad entirely in robes “washed... white in the blood of the Lamb.” Having overcome death, the same Lamb shepherds them to “springs of the water of life.” And, fulfilling a long-standing promise, God abolishes want and suffering once and for all, sheltering the saints in an eternal haven of peace.

² Ibid. 150.

There's a lot to capture our attention in this prophecy, but I want to draw your attention to the saints' attire. There's a reason leaders in worship wear white robes. In the early centuries of the church, the newly baptized, still dripping from their immersion in the baptismal pool, were each clothed in a white robe, the *tunica alba*, or alb. "Washed and bleached clean," a liturgist explains, "this garment became one of the basic symbols of baptism. It expressed the idea that to be baptized was to 'put on Christ' and to join the multitude of people who had 'washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'"³ Does that sound familiar? I like to suggest that we might all wear white robes on Sunday mornings by virtue of our identity as baptized, beloved children of God, but we would risk alienating visitors. So, leaders wear the alb on behalf of everyone else.⁴

Still, "wearing white" is what makes a saint, that is, we are saints on account of baptism. **Through the gift of Holy Baptism, God clothes us in the grace of Christ and sweeps us up into a great communion of saints, children of God in every time and place. And, joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, we receive the promise of abundant life with him.** In the end, salvation belongs to God, and to the Lamb!

This is why we make a point each year to honor the lives of saints who have gone before us, taking comfort in the fact that their baptismal pilgrimage is complete. We don't rely on their faithfulness, their goodness, their worthiness

³ Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*, 91.

⁴ Ibid. 92.

before God to earn them a place in God's presence, but instead **we rely on God's faithfulness to *them*.**

And, we rely on God's faithfulness to us. Today, our confirmands will affirm the promises made on their behalf at baptism, declaring their intention to claim this tradition of faith as their own and continue to struggle with it. [Confirmands:] We know that they'll/you'll fall short of the promises they/you make. They'll/You'll go through ups and downs; they'll/you'll know joy and pain. But through it all, they may take/Take courage that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb. Their/Your baptism is a fundamental dignity that can never be taken away from them/you, a promise that in the end they/you, together with all the saints, will "come out of the great ordeal" with reason to sing God's praises.

Dear church, we are in good company, specifically the company of Saint Martin Luther, when we celebrate

what a great and excellent thing baptism is, which snatches us from the jaws of the devil and makes us God's own, overcomes and takes away sin and daily strengthens the new person, and always endures and remains until we pass out of this misery into eternal glory. Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time.⁵

That garment doesn't protect us against stumbling and suffering, but it unites us in one communion of saints in the hope that the love of God is stronger even than death. Thanks be to God!

⁵ Kolb and Wengert, Eds., *The Book of Concord*, 466.