

All Saints' Day – November 1, 2020

Introduction

After Christmas and Easter, my favorite church holiday is All Saints' Day. All Saints' is a celebration of Christ's Church. While we are not charter members, we become members of the Church through baptism. In the truest sense, it is the 'communion of the saints,' called into being by God to bear witness to the saving story of Jesus' death and resurrection.

A number of years ago, I used our Lord's Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel as the basis of an All Saint's Day sermon entitled: 'Remembering the Future.' The sermon suggested that past, present, and future merge into a singular experience of Christ in our lives because of the Beatitudes. I still like that idea; but this time, I will use an image from a children's book written by Alice McLerran. Her book is entitled: *Roxaboxen*. I hope you find this image helpful.

As further background for All Saint's Day, I am including several paragraphs that I just wrote for Immanuel's newsletter. This will be a bit more historical than the sermon, but still emphasizes our identity as God's saints.

The celebration of All Saints' Day dates back nearly seventeen hundred years. It began with the custom of commemorating all the martyrs of the Church, both those known by name and those known only to God. But over the years, the Church's understanding of All Saints' Day changed. It came to include not only the martyrs, but also all the people of God, both living and dead, who form the mystical body of Christ. All Saints' Day became a festival of the Triumphant Church — a day of celebration, as well as a day of remembering. In the traditional church calendar, All Saints' is celebrated on November 1st with the evening before that day known as the 'hallowed evening' which has come to be known as Halloween. Most liturgical churches of the Reformation celebrate All Saints' on the first Sunday in November.

But there is also another dimension to All Saints. We are part of something far bigger than any one of us. According to Dr. Martin Luther, we are the '**Communion of Saints,**' declared so by God, called together by the Holy Spirit, and saved by the death of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. This term best describes the nature of the Church. As the '**Communion of Saints,**' God's people are linked with those who have gone before them and those who will follow them through our relationship with Jesus, the Eternal One. Every celebration of the Lord's Supper prefigures the great wedding banquet when God reconciles the world to Godself through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are the present days ‘saints of the church,’ declared so by God. We saints take the words of John the Seer in the Revelation quite seriously. Listen to how he describes the New Jerusalem — which is our City of Gold. *‘In the Spirit, [God] carried me away to a great mountain and showed the holy city of Jerusalem . . . It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal . . . I saw no Temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb . . . The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants shall see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever.’* The New Jerusalem is the place where God is finally reconciled to God’s people . . . A place where sinners are redeemed, and marked with the life-giving cross of Christ forever.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Scripture Lesson - Revelation 22.1-4, 22.1-5

John the Seer wrote about his vision: ^{22.1}Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” . . .

^{22.1}**Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city.** On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Gospel – Matthew 5.1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God. ⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of
God. ¹⁰"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the
kingdom of heaven. ¹¹"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and
utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your
reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were
before you.

"Remembering the Future"

Let us pray. My pastoral prayer comes from the order of worship for the *Christian Burial of the Dead* in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Let us pray.

Eternal Lord, the generations rise and pass away before you. You are the strength of those who labor; you are the rest of the blessed dead. We rejoice in the company of your saints. We remember all who lived in faith, all who have peacefully died, and especially those most dear to us who now rest in you . . . Give us, in time, our portion with those who have trusted in you and have striven to do your holy will. To your name, with the Church on earth and the Church in heaven, we ascribe all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the joys of having children is watching them grow up and mature. As each year passes, their talents emerge and develop, their personalities change, and, I think, they become immensely more interesting as individuals. But all this change comes with a cost. Many of us lose our awe of the world around us. And unfortunately, we also become less imaginative as we grow older. *Realism replaces imagination.*

Our daughters had vivid imaginations. When Joanna was small, Vicki and I could make her stuffed animals ‘talk’ at bedtime; something both Joanna and we enjoyed. Julia had ‘sky-friends’ with whom she played in our backyard in Tracy, Minnesota. Our fenced yard and surrounding hedges provided the backdrop of many adventures for Julia and her friends – both real and imaginary. Even today, all four of us enjoy remembering those simpler times.

One of the childhood books that my wife Vicki read to our girls as they were growing up was called ‘Roxaboxen.’ It was written by Alice McLerran about an imaginary town that her mother and her mother’s friends created in a field outside of Yuma, Arizona. Alice McLerran writes:

It was just like any rocky hill – sand and rocks and sold wooden boxes. But we called it ‘Roxaboxen’ and it was a town all of our own. We created houses of stone [markers] and those old boxes became our furniture. There was one street at first, but gradually the town grew. With something round, you had yourself a car. But of course, with a car, you could get a speeding ticket, and we even had a jail. It was a special place to us—anything could happen, and often did.

McLerran tells about a group of children who built a small play-town on a desert hill. They used small stones to mark the streets and broken wooden boxes for furniture in their designated homes. One of the children was Marion, who was McLerran’s mother. Using her mother’s memories, she shared the story of the town of Roxaboxen and how it became bigger than life for the children who played there year after year. As Marion and her friends grew up and left Yuma, each remembered the town of Roxaboxen and how important it was in their lives.

Roxaboxen is a true story. Nearly sixty years later, those stone-marked streets still remain on a windswept hill outside of Yuma. The children in the story now have grandchildren of their own. Nonetheless, they remember Roxaboxen as **a place** of safety . . . **a place** to grow . . . **a place** where they first experienced what it meant to be a community of people living and playing together. Even though Roxaboxen was the product the children’s imagination, it was very real and it shaped both their futures and their memories.

I think that something similar happens in the Church on All Saints’ Day. In a strange way, *All Saints’* becomes our own Roxaboxen as we use our God-given imaginations to remember the past and look to the future we share with those who have gone before us.

Who are saints? As Lutheran Christians, the word ‘saint’ makes us a little uneasy. Whether it be genuine humility, or a fear of our Roman Catholic roots before the Reformation, ‘saint’ is not part of our normal church vocabulary. The word ‘saint’ means ‘holy one.’ In baptism, God claims us as sons or daughters, declaring us to be ‘holy’ or ‘set apart’ for God’s use. This is not to deny the darkness that is within us. We are willful

sinner who everyday repeat the sin of Adam and Eve and declare their independence from God. But in the words of Dr. Martin Luther, we are *'simul justus et peccator'* – saints and sinners at the same time. The promise of *All Saints'* is that we are judged and condemned for our sin; but forgiven and redeemed for the sake of Jesus.

The Scripture reading from the Revelation to St. John indicates that those who are to be saved will be beyond count. This multitude of people are not only united by their sinfulness, but also by their saintliness. John says that they are those who rejoice in the presence of the Lord are called *' . . . from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages.'* The grace of God is not limited by human categories, boundaries, or limitations. All the redeemed have taken their strength, not from the own resources, but from God.

The most striking aspect of 'sainthood' is that there is no boundary between the living and the dead. When we talk about the church as the *'communion of saints,'* we mean both the saints who are living and those who have already died. What all saints – both living and dead – share is a continuing relationship with Jesus. He is the Lord of the living and the dead. Those who are claimed in baptism; those who believe Jesus when he says, ***'I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.'*** they continue to live in Christ until all believers are gathered before the throne of God.

When we gather to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we eat this Holy Meal with the living saints who gather with us in worship sanctuary and with all the saints who have died and now sit at the banquet of life. One can even say that our communion table extends around the world and into heaven where all the saints are gathered. This is why funeral services include Holy Communion which is a meal for whole Church – past and present. The writer of Revelation puts it this way:

'[God] will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

The children who played at Roxaboxen eventually grew up and moved away. The story ends with the children, now as adults, remembering their childhood city. Alice McLerren's ending is bittersweet, I think, because *Roxaboxen* has long been deserted and is now accessible only in the memories of adults who have lost their sense of imagination. ***But that's not the way things are for the Church on All Saints' Day.*** We live at the intersection of the past, present, and future. One might even say that we

‘remember the future.’ Let me explain. It’s no accident that the *Beatitudes* of Jesus are often read on *All Saints’ Sunday*. They capture the tension between our present and God’s future. Just listen to Jesus’ words:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’

At first glance, the Beatitudes appear to be long on promises, but short on fulfillment. If you doubt me, just look at the world in which we live. The ‘*poor in spirit*’ and the downtrodden continue to be that way. The ‘*meek*’ have not inherited the earth. Only rarely do the ‘*merciful*’ obtain mercy. Peacemakers are not called ‘*sons and daughters of God;*’ but rather, ‘*meddlers*’ or ‘*traitors.*’

However, we must be careful. We err if we forget whom it is that speaks. It is none other than Jesus Christ, the once dead, but now living, Son of God. Without him, the *Beatitudes* would have no meaning. On the lips of anyone else, they would only be cruel lies with empty promises. For anyone else to call someone who suffers ‘*blessed,*’ would be mockery.

But not so with Jesus. We who hear his *Beatitudes* are ‘*blessed*’ because he stands in our midst. We are ‘*blessed*’ because Jesus mysteriously transforms our present reality of pain and brokenness into the wholeness that comes from God alone. In other words, because it is Jesus who speaks the *Beatitudes*, they are present realities, not future promises. We who are counted among the ‘*blessed of the Lord*’ are promised participation in the Kingdom of God, both in this world and the next. ***In other words, our future is now!***

The Beatitudes, you see, are signs that the Kingdom of God is present among us. And because the Kingdom is present now, we are no longer prisoners of our sinful pasts. The *Beatitudes* are affirmations by Jesus that we are free. We are free of the *I should have’s* and *I wish I hadn’t’s* that make for human sin. The *Beatitudes* are reminders that we are free from the guilt and the brokenness of our sin. We are free because it is Jesus, the once dead, but now living Savior who declares us to be free. ***And by so freeing us, Jesus makes the future possible now.***

Empowered by God's Holy Spirit, the Beatitudes become more than words of comfort, they become a way of life. We are 'blessed' because we have been claimed in baptism and made part of the Kingdom of God. Today on *All Saints' Sunday*, we are the 'blessed' as we kneel to receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion. We are the 'blessed' because Jesus unites us with all the saints who have gone before us. We are 'blessed' because we can remember the future we have in Jesus.

So where is exactly the Kingdom of God? In a way, it's like Roxaboxen; it never goes away. ***Where is the Kingdom of God?*** It is here right now in our midst. ***Where is the Kingdom of God?*** We saints never find it; it finds us. Amen.