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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/6/2011, All Saints Sunday
Revelation 4-7, 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us linger this morning with the heavenly question from our First Lesson, from Revelation 7: Who are these?

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” (Revelation 7:13, RSV)

Many good things could be said about these white-clad folks. In this sermon, let me lift up two of them: (1) They are holy examples for us. And (2) they are comforted now.

THEY ARE HOLY EXAMPLES FOR US.

I bet you know that the official Lutheran position on the Saints is that we do not “invoke” the saints. We do not do, then, what young Martin Luther did when he got caught in that famous summer thunderstorm near Erfurt long ago. When he was knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt, he cried out, “Help me, St. Anne, I will become a monk.”¹ Glad to say, St. Anne saved him, he became a monk, and the rest is history. His invocation of the saint was the momentous first step toward the Reformation.

But again, we do not do what young Luther did: we do not invoke the saints. We believe that there is not enough Biblical evidence to support the invocation of the saints,

Still, there is a positive side to our official Lutheran stance on the saints. While we do not invoke the saints, nonetheless our official stance encourages us to honor the saints and to seek to be inspired by their example. Let me, then, read for us Augsburg Confession XXI, “Concerning the Cult of the Saints”:

Concerning the cult of the saints our people teach that the saints *are to be remembered* so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith. Moreover, it

¹ On Wednesday, 2 July [1505], the day of Mary’s Visitation, Luther was on his way back from Mansfeld. About six kilometers away from Erfurt, where the road skirted the Stollberg hills near the village of Stotternheim, a thunderstorm broke out around him. A bolt of lightning struck nearby, perhaps knocking him to the ground and injuring his leg, filling him with the fear of death and wresting from him the vow, “Help me, St. Anne, I will become a monk.” (Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: 1483-1521, His Road to Reformation* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1981 in German and 1985 in English), page 48.

is taught that each person, according to his or her calling, should take the saints' good works as an example. For instance, His Imperial Majesty, in a salutary and righteous fashion, may follow the example of David in waging war against the Turk. For both hold a royal office that demands defense and protection of their subjects. However, it cannot be demonstrated from Scripture that a person should call upon the saints or seek help from them. "For there is only one single reconciler and mediator set up between God and humanity, Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 2[:5]). He is the only savior, the only high priest, the mercy seat, and intercessor before God (Rom. 8[:34]). He alone has promised to hear our prayers. According to Scripture, in all our needs and concerns it is the highest worship to seek and call upon this same Jesus Christ with our whole heart. "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous . . ." [1 John 2:1]²

You see, then, both the positive and the negative parts of our Lutheran teaching on the saints. Negatively, we do not have enough Biblical support to warrant calling on them. But positively, we can study and cherish the saints for the living example they give us of Christian faith on earth.

This, in turn, means that Christians should themselves, in their own generation, seek to become saints. For what is the point in studying the example of the saints if we are not ourselves intending to become more saintly? If we intend to do what Augsburg Confession XXI says, then we are going to try to follow the example of the saints, and so, seek to be more saintly ourselves. We are going to seek to follow the saints as they followed Christ.

And this in turn means that we should seek to be a distinctive people in the world. After all, if we are following the example of the *saints*, we are not likely to end up looking just like the rest of the world. Instead, there should tend to be some of the saints' signs of holiness about us, at least as we get older and more mature in the faith. And so it is that we should seek that the Biblical verse quoted at Baptism should come true in our own lives:

Remember the words of St. Peter: You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

² Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Page 58.

Each generation of the Church has to ask itself the question, “How are we doing in this matter of the saints? Are we, in our modern world, doing well in raising up saints on earth?”

THE NATIONAL STUDY OF YOUTH AND RELIGION

Alas, I am not so sure we are doing a good job at this, at least judging by a substantial research project called *The National Study of Youth and Religion* (2001-2008)³. The theme of the Study is that the church in America is dying not because of its failure, but because of its success in conforming itself to the ways and convictions of the world. The Report reveals that teenagers are *not* in rebellion or hostile to religion, nor to their congregations. They do not think church people are hypocrites or insincere. Most teenagers are content to go to church along with their families. But the thing is, they just don't much care. They see little to care about. So, they are not hostile, but rather indifferent to the Church. And their indifference reflects the success of the modern church's preaching about Jesus:

Overall, the challenge posed to the church by the teenagers in the National Study of Youth and Religion is as much theological as methodological: the hot lava core of Christianity -- the story of God's courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God's suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ's death and resurrection, and of God's continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit -- has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is a stake... the problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us” -- which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all. (Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, 2010) pp. 11-2)

The saints did not believe what this Report thinks the modern church believes: that “Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little.” The saints felt that God requires much of them and asks them to try to live up to the Name they bear:

³ The National Study of Youth and Religion is a research project directed by Christian Smith, Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame and Lisa Pearce, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This project, generously supported by Lilly Endowment Inc., began in August 2001 and is currently funded through December 2010. Wave 3 (January 2007 - December 2010) is also supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The project is designed to enhance our understanding of the religious lives of American youth from adolescence into young adulthood, using telephone survey and in-depth interview methods. <http://www.youthandreligion.org/research>

They are “Christians.” They are meant be “little Christs” in this world. They are meant to give this world some feel for what it is like to actually take up the cross and follow Jesus.

IMITATION OF THE SAINTS

An earnest young man recently asked me to describe for him what a full and rich human life would look like. I did not answer in terms of material prosperity, but rather according to the traditional teaching of the church: a good and full human life is a virtuous life. It is a life framed by the traditional virtues of courage, justice, openness to reality, self control, faith, hope, and love.

The young man accepted this, but then asked an important follow-up question: How does one become virtuous? Well, the traditional answer to that is that one becomes virtuous by doing the things a virtuous person does. And so, one becomes courageous, for example, by doing the thing a brave person would do, even if our hearts are beating wildly with fear as we do that thing the brave one would do.

So far, so good. But then the question becomes, “How are we going to do the thing a virtuous person would do if we never actually see any virtuous people?” How are we going to become brave if we don’t see any models of courage about us? How are we going to people of reliable self control if we have no models of such control around us?

From this line of ideas, I conclude that the church over the generations and over the centuries is to be a kind of tag-team of holiness. St. Paul did not hesitate to encourage his congregations to follow his holy example. Here is an example of that:

⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to *imitate* us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸we did not eat any one’s bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. ⁹It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct *an example to imitate*. (2 Thessalonians 7-9, RSV)

But Paul, in turn, has courage enough to invite people to imitate *him* only because he is trying with all his might to imitate *Jesus*. And this, all Christians are called to do:

²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23, RSV)

A father taking the hand of a son, a mother taking the hand of a daughter, one generation of the Church taking the hand of the next, one saint taking the hand of the next: that is what All Saints Sunday invites us to celebrate. This is the Sunday that invites us to the most wonderful of adventures: the adventure of seeking to become holy, following the example of the saints as they followed the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THEY ARE COMFORTED NOW.

Now let me turn to another characteristic of the saints: they are comforted. They are in heaven, clad in white robes, and God himself wipes away every tear from their eye.

I passed a young woman on the sidewalk the other day. You have probably passed such a one too from time to time. She was speaking into her cell phone, and she was weeping. Perhaps she had just received news about sickness or accident in her family. Maybe it was her boyfriend dropping her, and she was left bereft, thinking to herself, “Here I am. I am all alone again.” I had this impulse to reach out and touch her, to hug her and to tell her that things will be better. And I certainly hope that someone in her life did that for her.

But these white-clad saints: they have Almighty God himself to reach out and touch them and to wipe away every tear from their eyes. Yes, and his comfort shall be an everlasting kind of comfort, not soon to be replaced by more tears, but rather to endure from age to age. Ten thousands years shall pass and those white-clad saints will still be glad!

Imagine that we could talk to a saint as he or she drew near to death. Imagine we were at the bedside of the emaciated body, with the breath becoming shallow and the blood pressure dropping. If the dying saint had enough strength left to speak, how do you think that one would answer if we asked him, asked her, whether he has any regrets? “Do you regret that you walked this path? After all, you have suffered many blows along the way. You have chosen the good and you have forsaken the bad, as if *you* were not the chief cause of your own concern. You have had to pay a cost for following Jesus. You have had to bear a cross for your discipleship. You have spent your threescore and ten years. They are all gone. Do you regret it now?”

I daresay that that dying saint would regret nothing, except perhaps, that he or she did not follow Jesus with even more earnestness. And that would be the saintly answer on *this side* of heaven. While still in his hard world, lying on the deathbed, the saint is able to know *some* comfort.

Ahh, but see that one just a few minutes later! See that one embraced in the arms of Father Abraham. See that one greeted with a cheer by the angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim. See that one hugged and clapped on the back by the apostles of old and by saints who walked the same good path beforehand. See that one held close in the arms of a saintly mother or father who carried his

own cross, fought her own good fight in her own generation and now rests in Christ, her heart beating with joy to greet her son or daughter again. Above all, see that saint comforted by Jesus himself, whose divine hands wipe away the tears from every eye.

THE INTERCESSIONS

On this All Saints Sunday, I find myself thinking of a passing line in a sermon by Billy Graham over in Queens. This was just a few years ago. He referred to his old colleague in the Gospel George Beverly Shea, and he calmly said, “Brother George and I are getting old. Err long we will be off to be with Christ.” Well, the truth is that for all we know, err long any of us might be off to be with Christ.

Soon, our liturgy will turn to the intercessions. It is our custom on All Saints Sunday to call out the names of our church members and friends who have died since last All Saints Sunday.

This year, we will be adding a name to the list you see printed in our worship folder. Just recently we learned the very sad news that our friend Paul Thurston has died. So, we will include him in the list we remember with gratitude.

I speak of this, partly to give you forewarning that we will call out Paul’s name. But also I speak of it for this reason too: when our text promises that God himself will wipe away ever tear from the eyes, he means not only the tears of those who have died, but also the tears of those who are left to grieve for those who have died. Err long... we don’t know when, but err long, this valley of tears is going to be replace by the goodness and the joy, the righteousness and the comfort that our Maker intends for us, and which is won for us by the Chief of all Saints, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.