

# All Saints' Day

## November 7, 2021

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today, we celebrate and give thanks for all the Saints. The word "Saint" is truly a special word for a person. Yet, it is often misunderstood word. It means different things to different people. And, if the word *saint* means different things to people, then what about that phrase we spoke in the Apostles' Creed? We confessed this morning that the church (that includes you and me) is the *Communion of Saints*. If the word *saint* means different things to different people, then so does the phrase the *Communion of Saints*. So then, what or who is a *saint*? What or who is the *Communion of Saints*?

It's football season and for some people, if you were to mention the saints to them, they would think you were talking about the New Orleans Saints of the National Football League. They would tell you that the Saints are in second place in the NFL South – one game behind the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and they are expected to win again today by seven points when they host the Atlanta Falcons at 12:00 pm, which can be viewed on Fox Sports. But who follows football?

Another popular notion is that a saint is a person of great faith. Some might cite people from the Bible, like St. Peter, or St. Paul, or even, St. Mary. Or they might name some other Christians who lived since the time of the Bible but practiced their faith in an extraordinary way like St. Jerome or St. Augustine or even St. Nicholas.

Many people think of saints as some sort of super Christians that are/were just plain better than the rest of us. The people who are described with the phrase, “Now, he or she, is a saint.” But there is a problem with these popular notions of saints. They are paradigms of greatness. And we often point to them as an excuse and say, “I can’t live my life the way they did, I’m no saint.” “I can’t confess my faith to others very well. After all, I am no saint.” Or “I can’t catechize my children. That really takes a saint and I am no saint.” But if everyone took that attitude the church on earth would stagnate while we all waited for THE saint – the super Christian – to step up and do all the work. Some people give saints godlike qualities. Small statues of saints become good luck charms and others hang from rearview mirrors or get buried in lawns.

For some people, the saints become like the gods of mythology. There is the patron saint of travelers, the patron saint of laborers, the patron saint of health, the patron saint of the sea, the sky, the land, and so forth. And some people even pray to these saints. The Bible says we are to pray to God alone through Jesus.

Turning to the Bible, which Martin Luther and we Lutherans believe to be the source of all truth, we find a different way of defining the word saint. In the opening greeting of most of his letters, Saint Paul addressed his readers as saints. He wrote to the saints in Rome, to the saints in Corinth, to the saints in Ephesus, and so on. The English word “Saint” that we read in these greetings is translated from the Greek word “hagios” which means “holy.” St. Paul addressed these people as holy. We could translate his greeting as “holy ones” instead of “saints.” St. Paul was calling these Christians “holy ones.” Now, this prompts questions. How does a person become holy? What does a holy person look like? Are there any holy ones – saints here in this church today?

If we look at Scripture and today’s first reading from Revelation 7, we are asking a very similar question to the one asked by the elder to Saint John when he was given that glimpse of heaven. He

asked, ***“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?”*** The elder gave St. John, and us, the answer just a verse later, saying ***“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”***

What a beautiful picture we have been given of what a saint looks like. But remember, the prophet Isaiah gave us a completely different picture when he wrote in Isaiah 64:6, ***“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”*** Yet, this elder tells St. John, and us, that the blood of the Lamb removes that pollution and makes our garments pure and white again. And the Lamb is Jesus Christ who was sacrificed on the cross. His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death removed the pollution of sin and guilt from our deeds. Jesus made all those saints shown in the Revelation and all of us who believe in Him in faith and righteous in God’s eyes. Jesus made us as radiant and white as He was at His Transfiguration. The work of Jesus Christ makes our sinful deeds into pure white robes suitable for heaven. Instead of seeing our sinful, unholiness, God sees the perfection and holiness of Jesus when He views us.

So we learn that saints are **NOT** people who make themselves holy, they are saints because they receive holiness by the Father’s grace, for the Son’s sake, through the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. And all this is a free gift of grace not merited by anything we or any one of these saints do. Luther had a phrase for this, ***“Simul iustus et Peccator,”*** which means simultaneously (at the same time) we are saints and sinners. Every faith-filled saint is a sinner by reason of his humanity and at the same time a saint (a holy one) by reason of the grace of God and faith in the work of Jesus. If you believe and have faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Redeemer and if you follow Him in the Way that was shown to you, then you are Christians. And being Christian, you are a saint (a holy one) despite your sin. And that is the definition of all these

who we remember today. We lit a candle for them that symbolizes they followed the light of the world, their Savior, Jesus.

Today's second reading, our epistle, gives us another name for a saint. Saint John wrote, ***"See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God; and so we are."*** Child of God, saint, Christian – these are all different names for those who have saving faith in Jesus Christ – all different names for those of the great multitude who will stand before the throne of the Lamb.

If you think you are not holy enough to be a saint then join the club. St. Matthew was a tax collector. St. Philip doubted that Jesus could feed the five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. St. Peter denied ever knowing Jesus – not once but three times. St. Thomas doubted that Jesus rose from the dead. St. James and St. John tried to make a power grab from the other disciples so they could rule at Jesus' right hand. St. Paul called himself the chief of sinners because he persecuted the church before the Holy Spirit planted faith in his heart. When Paul wrote to the saints in Corinth, he had to scold them for a number of reasons. One of those was that they were abusing the Lord's Supper. St. Paul wrote to these saints, yet, sinful Corinthians, ***"When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk."*** Can you imagine being drunk at the Lord's Supper? Nevertheless, in the greeting of his letter, he still calls them saints – holy ones. They were not perfect, they were sinners, but they were still holy in God's eyes by faith in Jesus Christ.

So, what is the Communion of Saints? It is all the people of God, all the Christians, on earth and in heaven, all the holy people – all those who believe that Jesus is both Christ and Lord. Commenting on the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, Luther wrote this about the communion of saints: *"This is the meaning and substance of this phrase: I believe that there is on earth a holy*

*little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding.”*

This Communion of Saints spans two different worlds. Here on this earth, the Communion of Saints struggles with life in this sin-soaked world. We are the Church Militant. Even though Jesus has defeated Satan with His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, Satan still fights to get our souls and the Church Militant is the battlefield. We must continuously look to our Champion, Jesus Christ to give us the victory. And there is the Church Triumphant gathered at the throne of the Lamb – the ones who have **“washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** They have returned to Paradise, to the Garden of Eden. They are without sin, without hunger, without misery, without tears, and without death itself. And the one called the Lamb is their Shepherd – who leads His own lambs to living fountains of water. All memory of pain, death, sin, sickness, poverty, hunger, persecution, and hatred are wiped from their eyes along with their tears.

Even though this church spans two worlds, there are NOT two churches: one here on earth and another in heaven. No, we *“believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.”* The oneness of the church is not destroyed even by the separation of death. For where Jesus is, there are the saints – those here on earth, and those who have *“come out of the great tribulation”* of life in this world. The church on earth and the church in heaven unite around the throne of God and in the presence of the Lamb. When we gather around the altar each Sunday, we know that our deceased relatives and friends who have **“washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb”** are right here with us. When we sing *“Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world,”* we sing along with the countless Christians of every age. When we chant *“Holy, holy, holy,”* we do so with billions of the faithful from every time and place. And when we come before the Body and Blood of the Lord, we are united with those that we wish we could still speak to but

can't. We join with those whom we love but can no longer embrace. At this altar we are not only in the presence of Jesus but are also surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, this host arrayed in white, those who fall on their face night and day before the Lord Himself.

What was so distinguishing about these saints and all the other saints that we know have gone before us? I think it is portrayed in this story: *"After a long career, a pastor died. He was standing at the Gates to Heaven. Another man was standing there with him. He was dressed in a loud shirt, blue jeans, and sunglasses. Saint Peter said to this man, 'what were you in life?' The man answered, 'I was a taxicab driver.' And, St. Peter gave him a golden staff, and silk robes, and welcomed him into heaven. Saint Peter then turned to the pastor and asked him what he had been in life and the pastor told him. When the pastor finished, Saint Peter gave a wooden staff, and cotton robes and welcomed him into heaven. The pastor was perplexed and his ego was a little tarnished. He complained to St. Peter, 'Why is it that, I, a man of the cloth, only gets a wooden staff and cotton robes and that taxi driver got a golden staff and silk robes?' Saint Peter answered, 'Well up here we rate people on results. When you preached, people went to sleep. But when that taxicab driver drove, people prayed.'"*

I look forward to the celebration of the saints every year. I get a little teary-eyed and my voice cracks when we sing "For All the Saints." It gives me pause to remember all the saints in my family. All of them were sinners, and I could tell you about those sins, BUT all of them were saints by their faith in Jesus and their commitment to following Him. I can also tell you that each of them knew that their lives were given by God. They knew their time was limited on earth. They also knew that as followers of Jesus, He expected them to demonstrate His love for them in what they did with their time-limited life on earth. They all knew they were on a journey leading to Heaven. Each of them in their own way served God and His church. Some helped build the little country church in which I grew up. Some helped maintain it (they

painted it, fixed the furnace, changed the lights, and cleaned it). Others (mostly the women), cooked meals for public dinners to earn money for the enhancement of that church. They were ushers, elders, members of the church council. They were Sunday school and Vacation Bible school teachers and helpers. They mowed the church lawns in the summer and plowed snow off the church parking lot and shoveled the sidewalks in the winters. They cared for the church cemetery and revered the saints in it that had come before them. And, those saints, represented by simple and weathered tombstones, carried the faith with them when they emigrated from Germany. They made sure it was well-planted in their new home in their families. In other words, they went the extra mile to dedicate some of the precious time they were given on this earth to serving God and His church. They were examples of faith both in word and in deed and they had a powerful effect on my faith as I grew up.

And so, it is proper that we thank and praise God for the men and women of faith whose works of faith and love inspire us and set an example of the godly Christian life for us. It is appropriate that we honor the work that God has done through their lives to give them true saving faith. It is also appropriate that we honor the work that God has done through their lives to affect the lives of people around them. It is completely appropriate that we, the Church Militant, honor those who have preceded us into the Church Triumphant. In doing so, when we honor the redeemed, we are also honoring the Redeemer. The saints who are holy in God's eyes testify to the only One who is eternally holy: our Lord Jesus Christ. It is His blood that covers our sin and allows us to stand in His presence. It is being baptized into His death that gives us a white robe. It is His Word and Sacraments that usher us into the throne room where we will never again suffer or be unhappy.

What then shall we do while we wait for our turn to leave the battleground of this world and enter the rest our Savior has prepared for us? We live our lives in this world in faith and often that is hard. But our Savior promises never to leave us or forsake

us. Although we are saints in God's eyes, we still sin. The battle with sin rages around us and in us. We live in the great tribulation. Yet, we can offer God the sacrifice of our worship and honor Him with the sacrifice of our time while we are still on earth.

Though we live in a mortal body decaying with sin, we can use these bodies to serve God and His church because we know these bodies will be raised and made new like the saints who have gone before us. Though our worship is imperfect, it will be perfected. Though our voices crack when we sing our praises to God now, they will one day sing in perfect harmony with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Though we're tired and distracted, hungry and bored, we trust our God to give us the will and strength to serve Him in this time, for we know one day, we will be so alive and filled with joy that we will never grow weary of joining the great crowd of saints in heaven, singing and praising God.

Fellow saints, who believe in Christ, we have been blessed with the examples of saints who have been with us in life as examples of the love of Christ. They firmly believed and had faith in His death on the cross for their sins. And He, Himself has clothed them and us with His righteousness, and through His resurrection, He will one day shepherd us to everlasting life. On that day, we will see our parents, grandparents, spouses, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, neighbors, and friends for we will all be in Christ for eternity in that blessed place where we will experience the eternal joy of God's presence along with all the rest of the Communion of Saints. Until then, let us generously give our time, our treasure, and our talents in His service and to His glory like all those saints who have gone before us and are now in heaven. With thanksgiving to God for all the Saints and to His Glory. Amen.