

Revelation 7.9-17; 1 John 3.1-3; Matthew 5.1-12  
Feast of All Saints (transf.)  
5 November 2017  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved saints, for so you are: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine the church year like a hill. A tall hill. With a long slope on the one side and a short slope on the other. We've been climbing up the long slope all year long. Beginning with the wait for the promised Messiah in Advent. Then His coming into the flesh and birth in the stable in Bethlehem. The visit of the Magi. His Baptism and Transfiguration. Lent, with its penitential air. The death of the Son of God on the cross. His glorious resurrection from the dead and sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

And then the long time of the church, as we learn to know all the Lord's promises in Christ given us in our Baptism. We learn to live in this world with hope in the next. And we learn what it means to bear the cross. For redeemed by the cross, we shall throughout life constantly be transformed to the cross. And our life will more and more take on a cruciform shape. Dead to self. And alive to Christ. Counting the Lord's many blessings in this life as nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed. Take they our life, goods, fame, child, husband, wife. Let these all be gone. The vict'ry has been won. The kingdom ours remaineth. All...the...way...up...that...long...hill. It's like a gradual crescendo to this day, the last major festival of the church year.

And now we're at the top. And from here, it's just a quick trip down the precipice to the end of it all. The imminent coming of the Lord Jesus. In glory. To judge the quick and the dead. The resurrection of all the dead. The gift of eternal life to all believers in Christ. It's ironic that while that life lasts forever, the church gives it only 3 weeks in the church year.

That's the view over the precipice. But we can also turn around and look back, too. Look back up that long slope we've been climbing the whole year.

In fact, the Scriptures appointed for today force us to do that—to look both ways.

For the view down that long slope, it's as if Jesus' words took in a view of all His Christians on that long slope. The poor in spirit. People who mourn. The meek. People starving for righteousness because they don't have any of their own. People who, shown infinite mercy in Christ, are themselves merciful. Those who, reconciled to God, out of love for neighbor make peace, not enmity. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Those who are reviled on Christ's account. In short, those living life *under the cross of Christ*. The cruciform life. The life transformed by and to the cross of Jesus.

But here's the deal. All you need to know about that picture is that it's a picture of no one else but you, a baptized Christian. Because you have become the you of Jesus' address. Blessed are you, He says. And He means any baptized Christian who hears these words. And every baptized Christian lives under cross of suffering. For if you have been redeemed by the cross, you will surely be transformed to the cross.

And this Jesus calls "blessed."

That's a sort of shocking teaching, isn't it, especially in 2017 when everything can be "fixed." If you're in a miserable depression, you take a few pills. And you're fixed. If poverty is on the rise and the middle class shrinking, you re-engineer the tax code. And it's fixed. If you don't like the way you look, you go to the surgeon. And your face made for radio gets turned into one made for TV. Problem fixed. And so we today live with the curse of the fixable.

But some things simply cannot be fixed. In fact, some things are the way are because they have been established in the immutable counsel of God Himself. And one of those things is this: if you have been redeemed by the cross you will be transformed to the cross. You will live a cruciform life.

But precisely for that reason, the cruciform life is called blessed. Precisely for the fact that God promises it it's a blessing. The world may call it a curse to be poor in spirit, meek, in mourning. But the Lord Christ calls it blessed. Our flesh may hate being merciful and making peace and rebel against the very notion because it stands to lose...too much! My reputation! Face! My creds! But the Lord Christ calls it blessed. And we may cower and recoil before the persecution and revilement heaped on Christians *just because they are Christians*. But the Lord Christ calls it blessed.

Blessed, because it doesn't happen randomly. Blessed, because it doesn't happen even by the mere allowance of God. But blessed *because it is God's good pleasure*. Not that we should go out and look for any of it. And somehow try to arrest and secure and get God's blessing. There's plenty of suffering to go around. And if you don't have it now, it'll come to you.

But blessed, because when it does come, it's precisely for this reason. Having been redeemed by the cross, you will be transformed to the cross. And you will live a cruciform life. And that is our comfort and satisfaction. It's the mercy we receive. And the kingdom and earth we inherit. That in this life we have suffering. But that in this life we have suffering *because we have Christ*. And because we have Christ we are blessed.

And having Christ makes us God's children. Looking down the long slope that seems like cold comfort. But because we have Christ God Himself will one day take all this suffering away from us. It's up to Him, not us, to remove us from this life of suffering and to remove the suffering from our life. So that here Jesus' entire encouragement and command to us is not simply to suffer, but to make our suffering as pleasing to us as it is to Him.

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I just want to pause here for a minute, because there's something really important to note. Luther says, rightly, that three things make a theologian: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*. Prayer. Meditation on the Word. And trials.

And this is an excellent teaching to take up on All Saints' day. Because the Lord made theologians of all His saints, and continues to make theologians of all His saints, in the same exact way. Prayer. Meditation on His holy Word. And trials.

We like the first two. Or at least we think we think they're preferable to the last. But, because Luther said it, we give a nod to the last one. Until it comes crashing into our life. Because for trial to be real trial, it can't be hangnail. It has to be suffering. And for suffering to be suffering it has to hurt.

But why? Why is trial necessary to make a theologian out of us? Because, as Pr. Kerns has been wont to say in the last several weeks, it teaches us to see with our ears. Suffering leaves us resourceless and

without help. Suffering seems to stand in the way of everything God wants to give—righteousness, holiness, life in abundance, and eternal life. And it seems to nullify it. But not in God’s world. And not for God’s Christians. Because suffering fans faith. Faith isn’t faith in what is seen, but in what is unseen. If I ask you to trust me that I’ll give you a thousand dollars but then put 10 Ben Franklins in your hand, you don’t need to trust me anymore. You already have by sight what you once had by faith. But as long as they’re not yet in your hand you have them by faith.

Here’s the point. In this life the *just shall live by faith*. That is to say, in this life we must walk by faith. Faith in God’s promises in Christ. Faith that when the pastor says, “Your sins are forgiven you,” they are. Even though you don’t see anything. Faith that when you’re baptized you’re stuck in the burial chamber with Christ, even though you’ve never been to Jerusalem. Faith that when you receive the bread and wine it is what Christ says it is, His Body and Blood, even though the bread tastes like Styrofoam cup and the wine like a cheap date.

What is all this but faith in God’s promises? Hearing, not sight. What is saying, “I have eternal life,” even as you grow old and die, but faith in God’s promises? What is laying claim to an eternal joy, even as you mourn, but faith in God’s promises? What is it to live securely in a kingdom, even as you’re reviled and persecuted, but faith in God’s promises? That’s how it works. Oratio, meditatio, tentatio. Prayer. Meditation on God’s holy Word. Trial and tribulation. These three make a theologian. And they’re making a theologian out of you.

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Well, that’s the view down the long slope. Life under the cross.

But All Saints Day brings the short slope into view, as well. Perched up here on the hilltop, it’s as if you’re looking at side-by-side before-and-after pictures. Over here, you on this earth. On the other side, you already in heaven. Over here, you mourning. On the other side, you with tearless eyes and tears wiped from you eyes. Over here, you hungering and thirsting for a righteousness you can’t ever achieve. On the other side, you, clothed in robes so intensely washed in the blood of the Lamb they’ve turned the white of pure righteousness.

And that, fellow-redeemed, is the promise and Word of God that faith clings to. This whole heavenly scene in the Revelation? The thousands gathered around the Lamb? That’s you there. God already sees it and knows it. The view from eternity is entirely different from the view from within a time-bound world.

And that—that salvation from all sins; that rescue from death and eternal death—that is the true blessedness of the saints of God. Because God isn’t just a fixer. He’s a rescuer. God doesn’t just come and show you how to keep your head above water, He pulls you out. And puts you on terra firma. He doesn’t just come to help you get better at not sinning; He forgives your sins and removes them from you as far as the East is from the West. And He doesn’t come just to teach you how to cope in this life; He restores you fully to the life He’s always wanted for you. The life won by the death of His Son. The life without sin, sorrow, and death in heaven itself.

That is God’s promise to you in Christ. That is your true blessedness. That is your land and kingdom. Your righteousness and your heaven.

Amen.

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