

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
All Saints Day (Observed) – November 7, 2021
Revelation 7:2-17, Matthew 5:1-12 – Who are These Clothed in White Robes?
By Vicar Peter Wagner

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Hear again from Revelation chapter 7, “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘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.’” This is our text.

A wonderful vision! The great cloud of saints and martyrs, their clothes washed in the blood of the Lamb. They sing day and night before the throne. No tears in their eyes, no pain or sorrow; they have overcome by the blood of Jesus. The Church Triumphant reigning with Christ forever, “Oh, what their joy and their glory must be, those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see! Crowns for the valiant, to weary ones rest; God shall be all, and in all ever blest.”¹

How can we join that number? How can we know if our names are sealed with them? You know the answer. Jesus said, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”² Be faithful to Christ. But knowing what we ought to do is one thing, truly being faithful till death is another! One day our faith feels strong, the next we’re discouraged and distracted. We’re like chaff blown by the wind.

We long to escape this vale of tears, to meet the saints triumphant. Here we toil. We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. Here our days turn to weeks and years, discouragement and monotony. We suffer pain and bereavement. We drift aimlessly in weak faith, doubting the promises of God. And we mourn the death of loved ones. Certainly we look forward to the day when we shall see them again, our bodies raised incorruptible, our joy complete. But that day seems dim and far away, almost unattainable. The problems of the present consume our attention.

Those who die in the faith are saints, holy ones. They are holy and righteous in God’s sight, because Jesus made them pure. The apostle John was asked, “Who are these clothed in white robes?” We know who they are. The saints are the patriarchs and prophets, Noah and Abraham, Moses and David, Isaiah and John the Baptist. They are the apostles, the martyrs in the arena, the medieval monks who copied the Bible for us to read today. They are Luther and Melancthon and the confessors who stood ready to die for the truth of the Gospel. And they are your faithful parents and grandparents, who raised you and taught you to trust in Jesus. We don’t worship the saints or pray to them, but we admire and follow their Christian example. We pray for God to keep us steadfast till death so we can die like them, confessing Jesus with our last breath.

We pray to confess Jesus with our last breath because Jesus alone is the Holy One of God. He is the only true saint. As the Holy One, he took on human nature, he took our sins to make us holy. He exchanged his holiness for our unholiness, his perfection for our guilt.

As the true saint, Jesus fulfilled all the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Well, Jesus alone was truly humble and poor in spirit. He alone mourned this fallen world, so much that he laid down his life for our comfort. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Jesus was meek, he hungered and thirsted to give his righteousness to the earth he created. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Jesus is patient and merciful, he is pure in heart. He doesn’t just see God, he is God, sitting at the right hand of the Father! And that’s a big deal, since he was forsaken by the Father on the cross!” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Jesus is the peacemaker, the Son of God, who made peace with God for us.

But though our Lord was righteous, still he was persecuted and reviled. All kinds of evil was uttered against him falsely on our account. He was accused of blasphemy at his trial. But he opened not his mouth, like a lamb before his shearers he was silent.³ They mocked and scourged him and nailed the Blessed One to the cross. Therefore his reward is truly great in heaven – so great that his death won the reward of salvation for all who hope in him.

Jesus taught the Beatitudes to his disciples. A disciple is a learner. If you’re a Christian, you are a disciple of

¹ LSB 675, O What Their Joy and Their Glory Must Be

² Revelation 2:10

³ Isaiah 53:7

Christ; he is your teacher. Those who receive his teaching, believe it, and confess it are his disciples. They are saints, holy and righteous before God. That's why the Bible doesn't just talk about dead people as saints, but Christians who are alive right now, everyone who has been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. All of Paul's letters – Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians – they all begin with an address to saints alive at that time. “To the saints at Rome, at Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae...”⁴ And this sermon is addressed to you, the saints at Zion in Columbus.

First John 3, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” As his beloved children and disciples – as his saints – Christ dwells in us. He works in our hearts so that we find ourselves beginning to live out the Beatitudes. Since he loves us, he humbles our pride to teach us poverty of spirit. We find ourselves grieving and mourning the unbelief around us. We learn meekness from our Master's example. The Holy Spirit puts in us a craving, a hunger and thirst for God's Word and Sacrament, the means of grace that bestow righteousness. We find ourselves showing mercy to our neighbor, since God has shown mercy to us. We find ourselves longing for peace, because the Prince of Peace has declared God's peace to us. But the world hated Christ, and it hates us too. So Jesus' promise also comforts us in persecution, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” First John 3 again, “The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

Jesus said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”⁵ When the Lamb hung on the cross, they pierced his side with a spear so that blood and water poured out. From that stream comes living water poured over you in baptism. From that stream comes life-giving blood for you to drink at the altar. And that same water and blood wash your robes sparkling white in the blood of the Lamb. Your faithful shepherd gives you all you need. “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.”

So each of you who is baptized by the living water of Jesus is a saint, a holy one. That's how God sees you. You were unclean, but in the church you come in contact with the holy things of God. The holy Word and Sacrament are poured out on you. You're washed in cleansing water of Baptism and in the blood of Jesus in the Sacrament. You were also sealed, by your baptism, into the saintly number. There God put his Triune name on you, claiming you as his own. Your name was written in the book of life. It will not be erased. No matter what you've done, no matter how often you stray. Nothing, not height nor depth nor angels nor anything in all creation can separate you – the children of God – from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Look to your left and right. These people all around you, they're also numbered with the saints. They too are holy ones, children of God. They will reign with Christ eternally! You might know their sin and feebleness. You may know their faults. Perhaps you're tired of dealing with them every day. Forget all that! These are your brothers and sisters, redeemed and loved by God. Your siblings, your parents, your spouse, your neighbor, the squirming kid in your lap – by God's grace all these saints will remain faithful until death. By faith, they'll all one day stand before the throne waving palm branches and praising God. If God sees them as holy saints washed white in the blood of the Lamb, shouldn't you see them the same? So honor and cherish these saints as your beloved fellow heirs of salvation.

And finally, saints of God, rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven! Our Savior will keep you faithful until death. He is coming soon, descending on the clouds so that every eye shall see him. That day is very near when we'll be reunited with the saints before us. So the whole universal catholic church, all the saints below in the Church Militant and all the saints above in the Church Triumphant, rejoice with a one tremendous voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen

⁴ Romans 1:7, 2 Cor 1:1, Eph 1:1, Phil 1:1, Col 1:2

⁵ John 7:37-38