

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

All Saints' Day Observed - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

11/03/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

20Then [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

21“Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

22“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

24“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

25“Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

26“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the
false prophets.

27“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29If anyone strikes you on
the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not
withhold even your shirt. 30Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes
away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31Do to others as you would have them do
to you.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

All Saints' Day, A History

Good morning! I have always been fascinated with the saints. It started when I
was little and the movie *The Saint*, starring Val Kilmer came out in 1997. I was 10 years
old and because of the movie I was able to answer a Sunday school question on an All
Saints' Day years and years ago. In fact, you might be able to trace my whole journey to
being a pastor back to that very movie. As I grew older and learned that “the cult of the
saints” was something for the Catholics, the interest fell to the back of my mind. It
wasn't until college, at a Catholic university, that I was able to learn more. We don't

celebrate the veneration of the Saints like the Catholics in the Lutheran church. We still celebrate commemorations, and certain apostles have dedicated “feast days,” but in our tradition, we stick to the tried and true understanding that all baptized believers become saints, clothed with God’s grace and love. Now, while many of us know that answer, I don’t think I’ve ever heard a sermon on how All Saints Day began. So today, that’s just what we’ll do.

As the hand written note from Pastor Wehman, Mark Wehman’s father, in a book he gave me says, *“Today we celebrate All Saints’ Sunday. Our rubrics state that when All Saints’ Day, November 1st, does not fall on a Sunday, the following Sunday may be called All Saints’ Day.”*

What we would translate as the word “saint” in the Greek of the Bible is the word ἅγιος (*hagios*). It means holy, blessed, or saintly. It is used as a welcome and greeting in many of Paul’s letters.¹ In fact, many pastors begin formal letters to the congregations they serve with a greeting for the saints at such and such a church. It’s something my pastor always did growing up, and is a tradition I continue also. So, when you see me write “To the Saints of God at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church,” know that we are participating in a tradition that dates back 2,000 years!

Trying to figure out how All Saints’ Day got started is a little tricky. Two books on worship begin their section on the day with almost the exact same words: *“The origins*

¹Ramshaw, Gail, and Mons Teig. *Keeping Time: The Church's Years*. Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. p. 132.

of a festival for all the saints are uncertain."^{2/3} That, by the way, was not an inspiring thing to read after you have already decided to preach on the topic. What we do know is that very early in our history we would celebrate, or commemorate the death of the martyrs, those who had died for the church. As the saying goes, "*The blood of the martyrs waters the seed of the church.*" And the witness of these martyrs helped to spread the message across the world. We do have a hymn from 359 that we believe tells us that on May 13 a commemoration of the martyrs was held.⁴ So we can assume that at some point in the late 200's or early 300's the tradition arose. In 411 in modern day Syria the day was observed on the Friday after Easter, as a sort of mirror to Good Friday.⁵ We also know that the tradition arose of having the day on the Sunday after Pentecost. Pentecost is considered the birthday of the church, and the thinking was that because the martyrs helped spread the message of the church, the occasion for honoring them should fall after its birthday. In fact, the Eastern churches, like the Greek Orthodox, still celebrate All Saint's Day at this time.

At some point, the date switched, moving from spring and summer to November 1st. We notice it first in Ireland, who by eighth century were celebrating it in the fall, because the Irish gave important feast days to the first day of the month. Another piece of history tells us that "*a vigil on the Eve of All Saints may have been an attempt to*

² Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980. p. 411.

³ Senn, Frank C. *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997. p. 191.

⁴ Pfatteicher, Philip H. *Festivals and Commemorations: Handbook to the Calendar in Lutheran Book of Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980. p. 411.

⁵ Ibid

*counter the impact of the Celtic Samhain, a night on which the boundary between the living and the dead was violated by the visits of the spirits of the departed at the threshold of winter.”*⁶ Which I find so cool, I just love that the church has this long history of taking other patterns, ideas, and traditions and changing their meaning. For example, the cross, a symbol of fear and death in the Roman Empire, becomes a sign of life and hope. A day when people were afraid of “spirits” became a time to remember our faithfully departed.

I would hazard a guess that as persecution against the church decreased, and the number of martyrs shrank, the ritual of celebrating a day for all martyrs shifted away as the death toll decreased and became a time to recognize all believers. We see this pattern established in 636, with Isidore of Seville.⁷ It seems that by the year 1000, All Saints’ Day was part of the established cycle of the church liturgical year. All Saints’ Day played an important role in the birth of the Reformation. Martin Luther posted the 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg on the eve of All Saints’ Day because he knew a lot of people would be at worship the next day. Over time, the celebration of Reformation Day began to take a more cherished role in the calendar, and All Saints’ Day moved to the following week.

So what role do the saints have in the Lutheran Church today? The Augsburg Confession provides some wonderful advice: *“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.*

⁶ Senn, Frank C. *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997. p. 192.

⁷ Ibid.

*Moreover, it is taught that each person, according to his or her calling, should take the saints' good works as an example...*⁸

Somehow, over time, we forgot that the we are all saints. One author even notes that “...*should someone call us a saint, we [would] probably demur and deny that identification. Children of the Reformation may resist even the idea of recognizing saints.*”⁹ For most of us, we think that the saints are people who are perfect, the ones who got it right. We forget that they serve as stories of hope and faith. God picked everyday people to lead extraordinary lives of faith and witness. My favorite professor from seminary, Dr. Dan Bell, used to get so angry that we didn't talk about the saints more often in our preaching and teaching. We have this huge list of faithful and inspiring saints to hold up as examples, and yet we pick athletes or celebrities. So, on this, the Feast of All Saints' Day, remember that we have a rich history and witness of people throughout all of history who have been faithful and strong in their everyday lives, and it may come as a surprise, but you're one of those too. Amen.

⁸Kolb, Robert, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. p. 58.

⁹ Ramshaw, Gail, and Mons Teig. *Keeping Time: The Church's Years*. Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. p. 132.