

All Saints Observed / November 5, 2023

1 John 3:2

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”

Children of God in time and eternity

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, which falls annually on November 1st. All Saints is a day to remember that all believers are saints in God’s eyes for the sake of Jesus’ righteousness, given by the Holy Spirit through the word, the washing of baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion, received through faith in His name. When people think of saints, they typically think of the dead. Nothing could be further from the truth. Saints are people who are alive to God through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, saints are alive to God whether they live in their bodies or their bodies rest in the earth. As Jesus said to the Sadducees, the Lord is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to Him all are alive. Believers are alive to God because they have been made holy, which is what the word ‘saint’ means, through the righteousness of Jesus received through faith in Him as Saviour and Lord.

In our lesson St. John rejoices in the family relationship believers have with God. He exclaims, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.” A child of God and a saint are one and the same. We become children of God through the word and by the washing of the Holy Spirit in baptism. Baptized into Jesus, we are given a share of His death that paid the debt of our sin and a portion of His resurrection to a new life in time and the fulness of life in eternity. The word ‘saint’ means ‘holy’ or ‘holy one.’ Believers are made holy in the forgiveness Christ earned on the cross and now gives to us through the gift of faith and the washing of baptism. We are made holy in forgiveness. We are continuously washed clean of the sinfulness that remains in the ever-flowing river of our baptism into Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are children of God in time as we live by faith. The fulness of our family relationship with God and with each other will come when Jesus returns and calls all God’s children, made holy in Him to rise from death to a new and eternal life. Then we will see Him as He is, for we will be like in Him in perfect holiness.

When people think of living saints, they think of good people, exceptionally good people. When we say, ‘So and so is a real saint,’ we are referring to a certain strength in their character, perhaps patience. People say, “She has to be a real saint to put up with him.” A person with a strong moral character is called a saint, while people say of a person with less virtue, “He ain’t no saint that’s for sure.” Saints are not perfect people they are imperfect people, whose imperfections are covered in forgiveness for the sake of Jesus’ righteousness. Saints try to be good people, but there are no perfect people. Saints are people who confess their sin and continuing sinfulness to God, so that they may constantly receive His forgiveness for the sake of Christ. Jesus is the only perfect saint. He is the Holy One of God.

Saints try to be good people, walking in the righteousness of Jesus, loving God as He loves us, loving and forgiving others as God loves and forgives us. We were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus so we would be free from bondage to sin. In baptism Christ sets us free from bondage to sin, the control of the devil and the condemnation of eternal death. We were baptized into Christ, so we would receive adoption as children and live in the glorious freedom of the children of God. God’s children try to be good people and please God with their lives, living in love toward Him and others in accordance with His word revealed in the bible. But most importantly, saints acknowledge their sinfulness and daily return to Jesus in repentance in the promise of their baptism, so that He might cleanse us with His righteousness and renew us with His Holy Spirit. Saints are sinners, forgiven and made righteous in the sight of God for the sake of Jesus’ righteousness, received through faith in Him and by baptism in His death and resurrection.

The identification of saints exclusively with the dead began in the early centuries of the Christian era, when the church suffered much persecution from the Roman State and Roman religions. Christians were not popular with the ruling authorities, or the religious majority of the Roman World. Christians wouldn’t worship the emperor as a god, which was considered treason. Christians wouldn’t worship the Roman gods along with their God, for which they were considered atheists and haters of humanity. In the centuries before Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire, many Christians witnessed to their faith in Jesus to the point of death. These became known as saints, because of the public way in which they gave witness to their faith even unto death. Their faith and witness were commemorated annually on the day of their death. A saint’s day is the day of her or his death, for in dying we are born to eternal life.

All Saints is a good time to remember those who have died in Christ, but not as the dead, but as those who are alive in Christ and who now dwell more closely in His presence. It is a time to remember their faith, inspired by the Holy Spirit, nourished, maintained and given growth through continuous use of the word and the sacraments. All Saints is time to give thanks to God for the faith they believed and the faith they shared with others during their time on earth.

People are saints because of Jesus. People become saints, because saints share Jesus with them. Through the words and witness of believers, the Holy Spirit opens the hearts of others to believe and receive Jesus as Saviour. We remember those who have died in Christ for their faith inspired by the Holy Spirit through the word of the gospel and for the faith they shared with us. We give thanks for their witness of Jesus the Saviour, in whom we also have faith and through whom we too are now alive to God as children.

A saint is a child of God for sake of Jesus, God's eternal Son. All people are God's creation, but since the sin of the first people, we are by nature children of a fallen creation. We are estranged children of the heavenly Father; separated from His heart of love by our sinfulness; spiritually dead in our sins, hostile to Him in our actions and attitudes. Yet, despite our sin and sinfulness, God loves His human creation. He preserves the lives of all people, nourishes and sustains us according to our physical needs. Despite the sadness in life, He gives us seasons of joy and gladness. God did the greatest good for all people by giving His eternally begotten Son to share in our humanity, live a perfect life in our place and to sacrifice Himself on the cross to pay the debt for the sin of the world. He did this so that He would reconcile the world to Himself in forgiveness. He did this so that all who receive Christ in their hearts through faith, would receive adoption and become His children in the fullest and truest sense of the term.

When you consider the sin of the world, expressed daily throughout the earth, witnessed in real time all over the world through modern technology, its hard to believe God would want to have any association with humans at all. He could just fence off this little section of the universe and have nothing more to do with us. But He hasn't forgotten or forsaken His human creation. God loves the world. He shows His love in this: that He gave Jesus to bear the sin of the world and pay the debt for every human soul. He did this so that in Christ sinners would become saints and be called children of God. How deep the Father's love for us!

Not everyone believes the universal atonement. Although it is explicitly stated in this letter from John, some say it would be useless for God to give His Son to die for the sins of those who refuse to come to repentance. But in reality, it shows God's deep love that He would give His Son to die for all souls, even those who refuse His love, reject His grace and despise His ways. No matter what we may have done, Christ died for our sin. No matter how far we feel we are from God, God calls us to Himself through the gospel of forgiveness and faith in Jesus. Today Jesus calls to us, saying "Come to me and I will give you rest."

Humans love those who love them. God loves those who hate Him. God loves the world. As Paul said in the letter to the Romans, "God demonstrates His love in this: When we were sinners Christ died for us." All Saints is a time to remember God's love, reflect upon the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross and to remember that in the gospel of forgiveness God's love in Christ Jesus reaches out to all people. Through Jesus and for the sake of His sacrifice, we are children of the heavenly Father. In His holiness we are made holy in the forgiveness of our sin. In Jesus' Name. Amen