

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

All Saints' Sunday
November 2, 2008
1 John 3:1-3

"Children and Saints"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

We are observing All Saints' Day either right on the day or one day late this year. On our Saturday evening service, we will be right on, November 1st. But on Sunday, we will be one day late, November 2nd. Though in actuality both days are properly part of the observance. Indeed the celebration of All Saints' is a three day event, beginning with the Eve of All Saints', October 31st (All Hallows' E'en) All Saints' Day, November 1st, and All Souls' Day, November 2nd. Now in our Lutheran liturgical tradition, November 2nd is known as the "commemoration of the faithful departed" and the fact that we have retained the red paraments this year in the sanctuary is because that is the preferred color for November 2nd. I checked on the Internet for a little history of this day and was reminded that it was first celebrated on May 13, 609 at the rededication of the pagan Roman temple, the Pantheon, to the Virgin Mary and all the Martyrs. Later during the time of Pope Gregory III (731-741) the date was moved to November 1st with the dedication of a chapel of St. Peter's in Rome to "the apostles, all saints, martyrs, and confessors and all the just who are at rest throughout the world." That is quite a lot to consider. Yet what is most interesting today is that in the 3 readings assigned for this day the word saint does not occur. Other words are used to describe the saints. And perhaps the most significant of those words is the word "children" in the epistle for this day. On the basis of that our theme is "Children and Saints." May the Lord bless His word that we as his children may also see that we are His saints.

I. Children

St. John in the epistle goes right to the point. Listen to the opening words of our text: See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are. Children—what an interesting term to use in our relationship with God. And what a fitting word to use to describe the saints. Now some might be put back a little by this thought. They might not want to think of themselves as a child. It is not a word to show strength and maturity and power. It is not a word to describe the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. It is not a word that would be the first to come to mind of someone seeking elective office as we remember our upcoming national elections this Tuesday. Exactly. It is a word of dependency and need as well as a word of trust in a loving father. As Jesus said, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of heaven like a child will not enter it." Our dependence is on God, especially on the Father's love by which we are called his children.

If we look at the words of the Gospel lesson for today in this light we might understand a little more clearly the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes are a description of the saints in this life. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the

meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. All those "blesseds" for those whom the Lord knows and loves and who live as his children. When John in our text says, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him", it is more than just a hint of the opposition of the world to the life of the saints. So Jesus says in the closing words of the Gospel, "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."

So the life of a saint may not be at all easy as the world would see it. There are challenges and sorrows, there may even be persecution. Even the normal weaknesses and illnesses, the stresses and trials of life that we all face are very much a part of what it means to live as a child and saint of God. For the life of a child of God is one where the Lord makes us his own and purifies us. As the closing verse of our text reminds us: "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Here is a great description of a saint without using the word. Those who are purified in Him who was without sin and who became sin for us. For the saints are those who are washed pure in the waters of Holy Baptism, who hear his life giving and life changing Word, who receive the body and blood of His Son in the Sacrament of the altar for the forgiveness of sins.

There is an interesting word play I noticed in the word for purity. The Greek word is agnos which has the very same opening letters as the Greek word for holy, hagios. That is the word for a saint. To be holy and pure is to be a saint. Yet there is one other rather interesting connection—to be pure is agnos, in Latin, agnus is a Lamb.

II. Hope as Children of the Lamb.

And that brings us to the most important point for this All Saints' Day—our hope as children of the lamb. It is the hope of glory. Often when we use the term saint or saintly we are using it to refer to someone who has gone before us. So in this service we will remember the faithful departed from our congregation. We understand the hope that is referred to in our text: "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." There in simple childlike words is a description of our hope. What a blessed thought that we will be like him and we will see him as he is. In Christ is indeed our hope of glory, the hope of the saints. All the weakness, the sorrow, the pain and loss of this age will be past. We will be like Him.

And this picture of hope is given much more brilliantly in the words of the first lesson for today. John sees the vision of the multitude in white. A number so great that no one can count. Of every nation, tribe, people and language. And they stand before the throne of God and before the Lamb. They sing the song of victory: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" They have conquered. They have come out of the great

tribulation. Their robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Here is the triumph of the saints and the glory of salvation. The Lord will bring his children home.

The trials and difficulties of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For we shall be like him and we shall see him as he is. And so the images come together. We are the children of God. We are the saints of God. We are the children of the Lamb.

Children of the heavenly Father
Safely in his bosom gather
Nestling bird nor star in heaven
Such a refuge e'er was given.

Neither life nor death shall ever
From the Lord his children sever
Unto them his grace he showeth
And their sorrows all he knoweth.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.