



## Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Revelation 7:9-17](#) [Psalm 34:1-10, 22](#) [1 John 3:1-3](#) [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Welcome today, friends, to this festive day! Today is the Feast of All Saints. Actually, November 1<sup>st</sup>, (Wednesday), was All Saints day – it is the day from which we get Halloween, or “All Hallows Eve” (meaning All Saints Eve). There is a trio of days every year: Halloween when we mock the forces of evil that dare to strive against God, All Saints Day when we celebrate and remember those who have shown us paths of life devoted to God and we give thanks for their prayers for us now in God’s presence, and All Souls Day when we remember and hold before God all who have died, praying for God’s gracious love for them. In these days, we especially recognize and celebrate our unity of the living and the dead, together in Christ. On this All Saints Sunday, we mark and celebrate and pray with all of these things in our minds and hearts.

This comes close to home for us at St. Luke’s this week. On Friday, we laid to rest the bodily remains of Jane Brooks, a faithful and loving longtime member of this congregation, and we gave her in gratitude over to God as she has crossed through the gateway into the risen new life in Christ – a kind of final new birth. Today, we baptize Eleanor Empsall and welcome her into the new life given to all of us in Christ, and pray for her as her life begins.

And we are surrounded and accompanied, as on every Sunday and in all times, by those who have gone before us. Today, we open our eyes to see, or to try and glimpse, the amazing company of people in God’s Kingdom, spanning all history and connecting across all nations of the world. Let the thin veil slide down. We are surrounded! We are in the company of all in Christ who have gone before us, and all now gathered in Christ around the earth.

Eleanor, who is this company of people, this vast family, that you are joining?

Jane, who is this company, this vast family, beyond our sight that you have joined?

We hear in the Book of Revelation today a glorious vision of the saints of God before Christ’s throne.

- They have been made whole
- Their suffering is now gone
- They cleansed, filled, held, beloved
- They are adoring Christ the Lamb, the Light, the Lover of all creation

What a beautiful, powerful vision. What a vision God opens for us, and for the early followers of Jesus in such a world of cruelty and suffering. In this world, there is so much suffering – such a world that will not easily receive the gift of God’s good news and the call to God’s new creation. There is so much suffering – such a world that will not make space for a new way of seeing and being – such a world where the poor are always supposed to be poor and ashamed, the slaves are always supposed to be dispossessed, the weak deserve their lot in life.

Who are your saints? Who are the martyrs, the teachers, the wisdom-bringers, the bold advocates and defenders, the brave lovers of people and creatures, the witnesses, the constant care-givers, the clean and bright ones?

Who are they?

What do they call you to?

Do you know that they are part of our fellowship in Christ Jesus – across all times, spanning the world? Do you know that we are united with them, even now?

They are our company, across the great divide of death.

They await the great final resurrection, and even now in God’s eternal embrace pray for us and cheer us on.

Great and small. Well-known and unknown. Remembered around the world through time, and remembered by a few in small places – and so many forgotten. But their gifts live on. Their words uttered, their kindnesses and wisdom given, their invitations to come near to Christ and to embrace the Holy Spirit’s movement, have sown seeds that have grown, flourished, and are still bearing fruit.

Who do you remember as saints, today? What are they calling forth in you? And, what do you want them to pray for, for us who toil and wrestle here and now in this earthly life?

Eleanor, who are you joining as your great family?

Jane, who have you joined beyond our sight?

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Who are those you have known or learned about, who have gone through suffering, scorn, and deep sorrows in this life, whose faith and love has shown you the face of Christ? Can you see them now, washed clean, in comfort and joy and loving adoration as they move in God’s presence?

Saints were not perfect. Today's saints are not perfect. We are, all of us, as the old Reformation saying goes, "Simultaneously sinners and saints."

Saints are not superheroes. I remember a great conversation with our reading-age younger folk a few years ago on an All Saints Sunday. The question was posed, "How are saints and superheroes similar, and how are they different?" The kids were great. They immediately said that saints do not have superpowers. They also don't have special costumes. They also don't have hidden identities. Our children understood – saints are ordinary people through whom God does extraordinary things. They are people open to God's leading and God's use of them for the sake of others.

God makes us all saints – and not because we are "deserving." I got really annoyed this week as I was taking a survey for the Pew Research Center. Generally, I really appreciate their good and careful research on religious and spiritual life in America. But there was a question that really got under my skin. It asked, "Do you believe in a heaven where people who have lived virtuous lives are rewarded?" I had to respond "No" – not because I don't believe in heaven (I do), but because heaven is not a reward. Heaven is a gift. Eternal life is God's gracious gift, a gift God wants for every person. As John 3:17 says, "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the whole world through him might be saved."

Sainthood is our journey, and our destination – even now. As we heard from the first letter of John, "Beloved, we are God's children *now*... and when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." We are fully embraced by God now. Do you sense and know for yourself that embrace – that love? You are God's child *now*. We, together, are God's children *now*. And, when Jesus is revealed, whenever and wherever that may be in this life and the next, we will be like him. In that moment, and then for all eternity.

So, what marks a saint? It begins with Jesus' charter, his manifesto, for the Kingdom of Heaven. It begins with who and what Jesus names as blessed.

And by the way, the word for blessed in Greek, *makarios*, is an interesting word. At its root, it means being made larger – in essence, being enlarged or made fuller in being. So, when we hear Jesus say "blessed are those," we can hear *makarios* – "in fuller, more complete being are those." To be blessed is to be more complete, more fully what we are intended to be and capable of being.

So, note who Jesus says are the blessed.

- Poor
- Merciful
- Mourners
- Hungry for Righteousness
- Pure
- Peacemakers
- Persecuted
- Scorned

This list of Jesus does not include

- The arrogant
- The vengeful
- The giddy and gleeful
- The morally disinterested or morally superior
- The warmongers
- The cruel and spiteful
- Those who think they are deserving or are treated as deserving

Keep this in mind. Keep in mind what kind of character and quality mark the people of God's Kingdom, and what kind of character and quality seems to get applauded, exalted, or excused in the eyes of the world around us. What does this world – this nation – value, and how does that compare with what Jesus calls blessed?

Friends, Jesus' words are not offered simply as some quiet consolation, like a first-century Hallmark card. Jesus' words are a declaration. Jesus charts and sets claim for a new reality – a new world, but a world that has always been in the reality of the Kingdom of God. Here, gathered on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, are people from all across the region, the poor, the lame and sick and diseased, the foreigners and outsiders, and those who cared for them and interacted with them, as well as those who yearned for a way to follow God more closely and to find the deeper truth of living. Jesus declares to THEM – to ALL of them – “You, who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, YOU are blessed. You will be given the earth, and the strengthening of people standing with you. You, who seek God's path, who simply desire and follow God, and who show this with mercy and peace-making, YOU are blessed. You will find the God you seek, in the company of others. THIS is the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven, among you, here and now, together. And any of you who are scorned and treated cruelly, know that God holds you.”

No matter what kind of world we find ourselves in, the Kingdom of Heaven is beginning. The blessed are not the shiny! They are not the famous or the glorified in the eyes of the world. The blessed are those who seem to have little and yet are lifted up – and the blessed are those who take seriously God's call to open the gates of the Kingdom, to comfort and support and strengthen and champion those gripped with sorrows and suffering, to level the rough places and stake claims on this earth for the meek. Remember, this teaching in Matthew is the front bookend of a series of important teachings of Jesus. At the other end of Matthew, we find Jesus painting a picture of final judgment of the nations, dividing them as sheep from goats. What is the dividing line there? “I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me, in prison and you visited me.” The blessed are blessed because they will not be left alone. They are blessed because the Kingdom of God is completed in circle by those who will bring comfort and strengthening, who show mercy, who will feed and fill others. WE are called to fulfill Jesus' promises of blessedness in the Beatitudes, by how we offer ourselves for the sake of the world around us.

This is the family and world you are entering, Eleanor. This is the world you have fully entered as you have crossed the threshold before us, Jane. You have been called to sainthood. We are all called to sainthood – to lives devoted to Jesus and his Way of Love. All our heart, soul, mind, and strength given in love to God. All our selves given in love to others, sharing God's goodness in all we say and do.

What kind of saint are you becoming? What is God calling you toward, so that you might become more fully like Christ? Where are you being called to sow seeds, to share and care, to

bring the good news to others that they, too, are blessed, welcomed into the Kingdom of Light and Life?