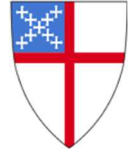




Sermon for All Saints' Day

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

November 2, 2025



Daniel 7:1-3,15-18

Psalms 149

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

Happy All Saints Sunday, everyone! This is one of the great, major feast-days of the Church. It ranks right up there close to the greater feast-days of Christmas and Easter, and it's a bookend to Pentecost as the great and glorious outcome of the Holy Spirit's power in our human lives. Today, we celebrate our transformation through Christ Jesus, the unity of all followers of Jesus in being made saints, our union with all who have gone before us, and the people in ages past who have let the light of Christ shine brightly in them and the fruits of the Holy Spirit flow through them. We open our eyes to see the amazing company of people in God's Kingdom, across all history and all nations of the world. 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.

These beautiful texts from the Bible for today point us to God's kingdom in Christ Jesus. This is the true kingdom, and the only kingdom, to which we belong. We find in this kingdom all whom God has made and is making saints – the great company of all whom God has loved and who have loved God and their neighbors with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Marked by the seal of the Holy Spirit, each one – eyes and hearts enlightened, captives of hope in the power of God that raised Christ Jesus from the dead. This is true for each one of us.

And what marks a saint? Not supernatural strength, not special superhero skills. What marks the saints is exactly what Jesus outlines in his great manifesto for the Kingdom of Heaven. The blessed of the Kingdom of God are what we hear in Luke and in Matthew, in what are called the Beatitudes. To be blessed is to be made sacred, consecrated, set apart, lifted up. Our Lord Jesus calls blessed the poor, the merciful, the mournful, the ones who yearn for righteousness, the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted and scorned. What a kooky Kingdom! The ones who are blessed are the ones the world typically kicks to the side. And then, in Luke's Gospel we also hear those who will face woe in the Kingdom of God. Woe is not a common word in modern English. But its synonyms point to a way of sorrowful affliction – it is anguish, grief, despair, wretchedness, disaster. These wretched ones are the arrogant, the vengeful, the giddy and gleeful who laugh at misfortune, the morally disinterested and morally superior, the warmongers, the cruel and spiteful, and those who get treated with privileges and prizes.

I want you to see just how consistent this message is in the Gospel of St. Luke. This is not just some one-off weird message by Jesus. This is the very heart of the Good News proclaimed by Jesus. And it picks up on all that Mary, Jesus' mother, proclaimed to her cousin Elizabeth when she was just a few months pregnant with God's promised child. You remember her words:

"Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord -- He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." And Jesus gets right to the heart of this in his declaration of purpose in the synagogue. You know his words, made his own from the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Today, we hear the preamble to the constitution of the Kingdom of God. It is the manifesto of what the Kingdom of God is about. It is not a bill of rights. It is our bill of blessings – and of limits, and of responsibilities. So, this message from Jesus doesn't just end with the woes, his naming of the wretchedness of those lost in their fantasies of strength and privilege and self-proclaimed merit. The message comes back to the citizens of the Kingdom, not to gloat at anyone's misfortune, but to do the unthinkable: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus gives us a view of God's ultimate balancing justice. But we are not the purveyors of God's judgment. And we are not the judge. So, here, now, this is how you shall live. The only one fit to judge and condemn, as Paul said in the letter to the Romans, is this same Jesus "who died, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Rom 8:34).

This is the high calling for all of us who are being made saints – to follow this Jesus who gave himself for all, and whose fullness of being fills all in all. This is the path of the community that has gone before us, that we share, that our dear Donna Kalberg lived while among us. It is the path of self-giving that brings life, again and again and again.

Our dear Donna is now in the arms of Christ, and in the company of the saints who have gone before us. And we are in their company, too. We are united with them in Christ. Such a great company of fellow citizens of the Kingdom of God – more than we can count.

Look at the photo on the front of your bulletin. This is from the Orthodox Cathedral in Skopje, North Macedonia, one of the many holy places that Heather and I visited on our sabbatical journeys. Surrounding the entrance to the altar, and on all walls and the ceiling surrounding the congregation, the entire space is filled with icons of the saints – some known widely across the Church and some more local – and scenes from the life of Jesus. In churches we saw across Albania, Greece, and North Macedonia, we experienced visually being surrounded by the great, unnumbered company of saints. Think about praying and worshiping in such a space. You would never forget that you are surrounded by the saints of God!

I want to share with you just a few stories from the people that Heather and I met and learned about on our journeys. Because, friends, it is through stories passed on that we see how God's light has shined brightly through some people and in some moments. As we found, this is true regardless of whether you are Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Anglican. It is true across all faiths, as we found among Jews and Muslims. We all have our saints and faith heroes, whether we call them that or not. They are the people who have helped us see and live differently. And their stories matter!

During coffee hour, I am asking you all to share stories with each other of the saints in your lives who have let the light of Christ shine brightly for you, who have shown you ways to let the fruits of the Holy Spirit grow and flow through you, who have given and emptied themselves for others.

Let me tell you just a few stories of saints past and present.

In Assisi, Italy, we prayed at the tomb of Francis and Clare, who gave up all they had and would inherit from their merchant and noble families to follow God's call of complete simplicity. They sought to follow the path of Jesus fully by emptying themselves and giving themselves completely for others. Francis in his middle years was often sickly. When he and one of the brothers were traveling from town to town, they

saw a poor man without any cloak, shivering and huddled by the road. After passing by the man and walking for a bit, Francis turned back. As his brother watched, he moved back to the poor man to give him his own ragged cloak. His brother objected, reminding Francis that he was sick with a cough and fever and that he needed the cloak for warmth. But Francis insisted, saying that the poor man had the greater need. The cross from which he heard Jesus speak to him, "Francis, go rebuild my Church, which has fallen into ruin," is still in a chapel of one of the great churches there. The Franciscans and Claretians changed the Catholic Church and spread across the world in service to the poor. What bold act has God called you to follow for the sake of the world around you?

You have heard me speak before of Cyril and Methodius, who went from Greece up into the countries of Slavic-speaking people. They are honored across North Macedonia and Bulgaria. On our journeys, along Lake Ohrid that borders North Macedonia and Albania, we met a saint who we did not know before, Clement of Ohrid. Clement was an early Slavic convert and follower of Cyril and Methodius. Cyril is sometimes credited with creating the beginning of the modern Cyrillic alphabet used still in Slavic-speaking countries. But they first started with another alphabet they created for the people's language, today called Glagolitic. We saw icons of Clement sitting with his own people and teaching them to read this strange text that looked like a mix of Greek and Ethiopian forms of letters. He committed his life to teaching and building literacy among his own people, joining with Cyril and Methodius and helping them to learn the language of Slavonic-speaking people in all its distinct expressions so they could translate the message of Jesus to them and help them to worship God in their own language. How can you share God's good news with people who think and speak and see the world differently than you?

Mother Teresa is honored deeply in North Macedonia, where she came from. She turned early in her life to following the call of Jesus, traveling far to India, and then willingly leaving even the comfort of the convent and school where she was first assigned, to live among and serve and feed and care for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. She chose to become poor herself as one among the poor, and begged for any donations to support her care for "the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone." The Missionaries of Charity that formed around her initially solo efforts grew to thousands across over 100 countries as they created spaces for safe care and love for outcasts of all sorts. This quote of hers is like the Bodhisatva prayer in Buddhism, a prayer of everlasting self-giving for the sake of all sentient beings. It is truly the heart of the Christ that St. Paul helps us see in Philippians 4. "If I ever become a Saint – I surely be one of darkness; I will continually be absent from Heaven, to light the light of those in darkness on earth." How has Christ called you to follow him to places unknown and uncomfortable?

Now, let me tell you about two recent Albanian saints. Albania before the 1950s, and then since the 1990s, has been a unique place of peaceful coexistence and interfaith collaboration for social good among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. During the dark era of brutal totalitarian control under the communist regime from the 1950s thru the early 1990s, external signs of religion were obliterated, churches and mosques were destroyed (the Nazis had already destroyed synagogues and demanded deportation of Jews, in spite of Albanian attempts to resist), and even cemeteries were destroyed, and neighbors were recruited and prodded to spy on and report on each other, so religious speech in public was eradicated. Since coming out from under the dark cloud of this incredibly oppressive regime, in the past 30+ years there has been resurgence of faith and regathering of faith communities, a resurrection of what the state could not completely kill, and a restoration and strengthening of interfaith collaboration particularly in work with young people to build and ensure a respectful civil society.

Sonila Dedja grew up in the era of the communist regime. Her grandfather was an Orthodox priest – one who was not martyred or exiled, but one who was banned from any religious activity and who was marked by public memory and reputation as a prior leader of one of the now-banned religions. Sonila talked to us about her experience of being shunned or treated differently and with cautious suspicion through her childhood and teen years, because she was known as the girl whose grandfather used to be a priest. Any public mention of any religious matters or words of faith, or the name of Jesus or any of the saints, was forbidden and might be reported by listening street police or neighbors. So, Sonila grew up without any obvious exposure to Christian faith.

But her grandfather found his ways. In family discussions or in conversations with trusted friends, when there were matters of values or conflicts or ethics that came up, he would say, “You know told by a wise man, about a stranger who helped someone that had been beat up and left for dead by the side of the road.” No names were mentioned. But the heart of the story was told and the points of the story were brought home. At night, at their bedtime, the grandfather would lean down and kiss each child on the forehead, the chin, and each cheek – making the sign of the cross on each of them without ever saying what it was he was doing. At times he would meet with people who brought him their baby or with couples getting married, and they would go into a room alone. Sonila asked her grandmother what he was doing, and her grandmother said for a long time, “Oh, that’s just something he does, that’s just his way, they are having a good heart-to-heart conversation,” or things like that. It was in her early young adult years that Sonila learned of the Orthodox Christian faith, around the time that the Iron Curtain was toppling down and Albania’s communist regime was losing its strangling grip. As she learned about the faith during that time when cracks were emerging and she could learn, she recognized what her grandfather had been doing all those years, in the quiet, hidden but not hiding, incredibly careful but intensely creative, finding ways of sharing and passing on the faith in ways that were possible. Sonila was baptized as soon as she could be when the regime fell and religion reemerged from its hiding places. Sonila is now the most senior woman leader in the Albanian Orthodox Church, married and obviously a layperson, but having completed a masters in theology with the blessing of the patriarch, and the Church’s staff leader for women’s ministry, integral to the Church’s community engagement, and a key member of Albania’s Interfaith Council. What new and renewing adventures has God opened for you?

So, let’s talk about a local saint in this region of North Idaho and eastern Washington. This region is known for being a hotbed for white supremacy as well as a place of bootstrap theology. In the 1980s, courageous Christians teamed with other civic-minded leaders (including a Jewish real estate developer, and with the leadership of Catholic priest Bill Wassmuth) to develop positive alternatives to the radicalization channels of the white supremacist Aryan Nation, and at the same time to work with the Southern Poverty Law Center and other networks to take down the Aryan Nation, seize their property, and use court settlement proceeds to launch the Human Rights Education Institute in Coeur d’Alene. Some of these leaders, especially Fr. Bill Wassmuth, faced death threats along the way – and Fr. Bill’s house was pipe-bombed. St. Luke’s where I serve was involved and hosted some of the important meetings of this group. There were also many members who preferred the approach of quietly ignoring and refusing to engage the Aryan Nation during their parade in Coeur d’Alene. This was the attempted strategy of many polite quiet objectors in Coeur d’Alene. But others worked with the coalition, the Human Rights Task Force, to bring down the Aryan Nation. We face the rise of this kind of terrorizing nonsense again today. How is God calling you to respond and step into the gap of silence today?

In our prayers on this All Saints Sunday (which is also All Souls Day), we pray for those who have died, and call on the great company of saints to pray for us and stand beside us. During this great Litany of the

Saints, you are invited also to come forward to the side altar and light a candle in thankful remembrance of someone who has been a saint for you, and to converse in prayer with that person.

This is the glorious kingdom of which we are a part! No other kingdom, no other nation is any rival to the revolutionary, life-changing power of the kingdom of God. And we are all being made “a kingdom and priests to serve our God” (Rev. 5:10). That includes you, being made a saint.

I invite you to get to know the saints. Get to know the saints long past by reading some of their stories. Get to know the saints in your own history by asking questions while you can, to learn their stories from people who still remember them. And get to know the saints living all around you by asking them to share their stories of God at work in their lives – and share your own stories as a saint. We are all made saints by God’s grace and the power of Christ working in us, and by us making space for Christ to transform us and work through us.

What a great company to which we belong! “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily distracts, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith!” (Hebrews 12:1-2a).