

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY – November 5, 2107
God Will Wipe Away Every Tear
(Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12)

A man, who was driving down a very busy street during rush hour, was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, however, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have tried to beat the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

But the stressed out, tail-gating woman directly in behind him was now furious. And she started honking her horn and screaming in frustration since she missed *her* chance to get through the intersection as well.

While she was still honking and screaming, stopped there at the light, she suddenly heard a tap on her car window, and quickly turned and looked up to see a police officer with a very serious look on his face peering down at her. When she rolled down her window, the officer ordered her to pull over to the side of the road. He then asked her to exit the car with her hands up. Finally, he escorted her to his squad car and proceeded to take her immediately to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and then placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, another police officer finally approached her cell and opened the door. She was then escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He was apologetic, saying, “I’m very sorry Ma’am. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing up a blue streak at him. Then I noticed the ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ bumper sticker on your car, the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder, the ‘Follow Me To Sunday School’ decal on your rear window, and the chrome-plated Christian FISH symbol on the trunk... So *naturally* I just assumed that you had stolen the car!”

The point here is simply this: there *are* no perfect people – not even Christians. So how, then, are we to understand the festival of the church year that we are celebrating this morning? Namely, All *Saints* Sunday.

After all, the term “saint,” at least in popular usage – and also in some Christian circles as well – is often understood as a designation for a *perfect* person; a *holy* person, if you will. In the Roman Catholic tradition, for instance, the word “saint,” as Dan Clendenin points out, is used in this very “narrow and technical sense.” For Catholics, notes Clendenin, “saints are Christians whose lives have been characterized by extraordinary holiness, heroic virtue, and the performance of miracles.” And, furthermore, only a Pope may

‘canonize’ a believer as a “saint,” and, *even then*, only after a long, and arduous, and in-depth process.

However, the problem with this concept of sainthood, for many, is two-fold. First, it’s downright discouraging. After all, the reaction of a normal, everyday Christian is likely to be: “Well, *I’ll* never be a saint!”

In fact, I can still recall how my good friend from high school, Dave Costeira, reacted when I first told him that I had decided to attend seminary and become a Lutheran pastor. Remember, we’re not actually talking about becoming a *saint* here, or anything remotely like it, just being a pastor. Nevertheless, Dave, who probably knew me as well as anyone outside of my own family, but who was raised Roman Catholic with a Catholic view of such things, was absolutely shocked and responded, “But Ed... *you’re* not holy!”

“Too often,” writes Dianne Bergant, “saints are depicted as people who are so *extraordinary* that we could never identify with them.” In the end, I guess, what it comes down to is a question of whether we understand saints as *extra-ordinary* people who do *extraordinary* things. Or merely as *ordinary* people who are called by the grace of God to, sometimes, *accomplish* extraordinary things...

The *other* problem of such a narrow understanding of sainthood (as I pointed out earlier) is that many of us find it hard, if not impossible, to believe that *any* human being could be so good, and so perfect.

Two friends were once talking and the one was telling the other about a story he had just heard. It seems that an angel had been called into the heavenly front office and informed by St. Peter that he had been handpicked for a special assignment – to go down to earth and make a list of all the people who had misbehaved.

Two months went by. Then one afternoon the angel came flapping wearily through the Pearly Gates and collapsed on a golden stool next to St. Peter’s desk. “Sir,” said the angel, “you don’t know the *magnitude* of this job. I’m going to need some help.”

“Impossible,” snapped St. Peter. “We’re shorthanded up here as it is. You’ll have to go it alone.” The angel struggled to the door. Then, suddenly, he was struck with an idea. “St. Peter,” said the angel, “suppose I make a list of all the people who *didn’t* misbehave instead? It would be much shorter and I’m sure I could have it completed for you in just a week.” “Good thinking,” said St. Peter.

So, the angel returned to earth and, as promised, he was back in a week with the list. St. Peter glanced at it and then passed it up the chain of command. Shortly thereafter, an order came down to write a letter to everyone on the list, commending them for their good behavior.

At this point, the fellow telling the story turned to his friend. “And do you know what *else* the letter said?” he asked. “What?” replied the friend.

“AHA! So you didn’t get one of those good-behavior letters either!”

In other words, the vast majority of us would probably agree that there really *aren’t* any perfect people in this world. And we have the evidence to prove it. As the cartoon character Pogo once observed, “We have seen the enemy, and he is us!” That is, we know *ourselves* – deep down at our very core – that we’re not perfect; none of us are. And so we would have a major problem, then, with the idea that saints *are* somehow perfect – or at least very close to it...

But there’s another way of looking at this, however. A paradoxical way, if you will. Martin Luther, you see, was very fond of paradoxes; that is, the idea that two things which are seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense, may *nevertheless* perhaps still be true.

Luther actually found a lot of examples of paradox in scripture, especially in the writings of St. Paul. For instance: the concept of strength in the face of weakness, or the idea of joy even in the midst of sorrow.

But perhaps the greatest paradox Luther ever observed or articulated was the idea that we are *simultaneously* both saint *and* sinner. In other words, we’re *both*, and at the very same time as well. Not one thing one moment and something else in the next. No... Luther believed that, as Christians, we are both saint and sinner at the same time.

We are *saints* – or, to use another biblical term, made “righteous,” or “right” with God – through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. But, as human beings, we are – again, at the very same time – also *sinners*. That is, in our daily lives we continue to “miss the mark” and fall short of what God had originally intended for us; that is, we continue to disobey and to rebel against God.

And this double character – of being both saint and sinner – remains with us throughout all of life. As the noted Luther scholar, Paul Althaus, once observed, “This is the great *paradox* of Christian existence.”

Moreover, there is just no escaping it... Although Luther once remarked, tongue-in-cheek I'm assuming, "Whoever drinks beer, he is quick to sleep; whoever sleeps long, does not sin; whoever does not sin, enters Heaven! Thus... let us drink beer!" Again, I assume he was only joking.

But being both saint and sinner is a paradox that, in the end, is only overcome by something that has come to be known as the "Great Exchange." Now scholars still debate whether or not Luther himself actually used this term. But, regardless, he once expressed it in this way: "Lord, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on what was mine; yet set on me what was yours. You became what *you* were not, that I might become what *I* was not.

In other words, in this Great Exchange, Christ *gave us* his righteousness and, at the same time, he took upon himself our sin. While we were exchanging our *sin...* for his righteousness.

Nevertheless, the following story is told by M. Scott Peck, the famous psychologist and author, of a woman patient of his who was suffering from extreme depression. One day, when she was due for an appointment with him, she called on the telephone and told him that her car had broken down. So Dr. Peck offered to pick her up on his way into work, but he explained that he had to make a hospital call before he got to the office. If she was willing to wait in the car while he made the call, they could still have their appointment. So, she agreed.

When they got to the hospital, however, he had a suggestion for her. He gave her the names of two of his patients who were convalescing there, and he told her that each of them would probably enjoy a visit from her.

When they met again, an hour and a half later, the woman was on an emotional high. She told Dr. Peck that making the visits and trying to cheer up those patients had lifted her *own* spirits, and that she was feeling absolutely wonderful.

Dr. Peck responded by saying, "Well, it seems that now we know how to get you out of your depression. Now we know the cure for your problem." But the woman answered, "You don't expect me to do that *every* day, do you?"

That's the tragedy of human existence and behavior, though, isn't it? "For I do not do what I *want*," wrote St. Paul in Romans 7, "but I do the very thing I *hate*." That is, we *know* what to do; moreover, we know what is right and also what makes us feel good. But, even so, we somehow can't bring ourselves to do it *consistently*. We are *all* notorious "backsliders," in a manner of speaking...

The noted Christian writer, Kathleen Norris, often writes in a very compelling way about the *reality* of the church. She notes that once, while she was struggling over whether or not to join a particular church, a Benedictine monk wrote to her saying, “The church is still a sinful institution. How could it be otherwise?” he asked. Norris then observed, “The church is... a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution,” she adds, “full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts.”

In other words, because we’re all simultaneously both “saint and sinner,” we should not expect anything *more* of the church; we should not expect anything different. The church is simply an *assembly* of saints and sinners; trapped by our own human impulses to continually disobey; and yet, at the very same time, forgiven and made righteous, over and over and over again, through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. *That’s* the source, the *only* source, of our unity – Jesus.

And it’s something we need to be reminded of each and every day. As Luther once observed, “We need to hear the Gospel every day, because we *forget it* every day.”

You see, if we’re honest with ourselves, and, more importantly, if we’re honest with God, then we have to confess, just as we do each and every Sunday at the beginning of the worship service, that we are *not* perfect people, and, what’s more, never will be. Therefore, we are *always* in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

However, if we think that, somehow, the church *can* be a perfect place, where no one ever does anything wrong, and no one ever gets hurt, and no one ever finds themselves in need of that forgiveness, then we’re just kidding ourselves. Luther’s reminder that we are simultaneously both saint *and* sinner is a constant corrective against inflated egos and self-righteous attitudes.

What the church *is*, however, is simply a gathering of forgiven sinners, set apart and made righteous through Jesus Christ, and thereby inheritors of God’s kingdom, who *fully know*... beyond the shadow of a doubt, that they *do not deserve* such favor.

It was comedian Groucho Marx, I think, who once said, “I’d never want to join any organization that would have *me* as a member.” That’s kind of the way it is with each of us, and with the church as well, isn’t it? Because if we’re talking about the church as a place for perfect people, then you and I surely *don’t* belong. But *if*... we believe that the church is a place for those who have been forgiven and made “saints” through their Savior, Jesus Christ, but nevertheless remain “sinners” who stand before God, each and

every day, in *need* of that forgiveness, well... then this is *precisely* the place where we belong!

In fact, it was on his death bed that Martin Luther penned the following words. After he died, they found a scrap of paper in Luther's pocket. And on it he had written, "This is true. We are all beggars."

So, beggars that we are, sinners for our entire lives, what will become of us? In today's reading from the book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, and of the entire Bible itself, we have this wonderful vision of heaven. As we heard, there will be a great multitude robed in white standing before God's throne, and before the Lamb; those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of Jesus.

As Sigurd Grindheim has noted, "Their robes are not white because they had kept them clean." (In other words, because they were without sin.) No, he says, "They had gotten them dirty. Very dirty. But they were washed in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb in the Book of Revelation is Jesus Christ," Grindheim reminds us. "He is the Lamb that was sacrificed for our sins... He never did anything wrong. But he took the blame for all of us. And he died for all of our sins. This way he takes our guilt upon himself and washes our guilt away, so that our robes can be pure and white."

Grindheim then concludes by saying "Everyone who makes it into heaven is there because they have put their faith in the grace of Jesus. Because they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ."

Then, in the final verse of that reading, we have this powerful and comforting promise, "...for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

...Three years ago, tomorrow, November 6, 2014 my father died. He was 93 years old. There are some still here at Hope who knew him. Most of you, of course, did not.

In his final hours, as he laid in their apartment in a hospital bed that hospice had provided; his thin, frail body fighting a losing battle against the effects of pulmonary fibrosis, congestive heart failure, and prostate cancer which was at that moment flaring out of control; he required morphine every four hours just to keep the pain at bay. I administered the liquid under his tongue with a dropper.

And that afternoon, as his breaths became shallow, and farther and farther apart, and the morphine was increased to every two hours now, it became clear that the end was near. Then, at approximately ten minutes to five in the afternoon, he took his final breath...

and was gone. One minute he was still with us, and quite literally in the next he wasn't. The breath of life that God had blown into Dad's lungs for the first time 93 years previously had simply... and finally... left him. And in that moment our tears began to flow...

You have all had similar moments, I'm sure – or if you haven't you probably will someday; being present for the passing of a loved one from this life. The pain you feel is indescribable; the tears seem never-ending.

And in moments such as these, we cling to the only hope there is. That our loved ones have, at last, gone home to be with God.

My Dad was not a perfect person. He was a sinner, as all of us are. But he was also a saint. For he was a baptized child of God whose robe had been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ...

Even now, three years later, the tears are never far away whenever I think about my Dad. And today, on All Saints Sunday, and the day before the anniversary of his death, they are even closer to the surface than usual. But his much I know. And this much I trust with every fiber of my being... There will come a day when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And, on that day, we will be reunited with our loved ones, and with *God*... forevermore.

Amen.