

**While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season**  
**November 1, 2020 – All Saints' Day**

*We come to the second special Sunday in these later days of Pentecost. This Sunday, Nov. 1, we join the larger Church and remember the saints. We give thanks for the witness of all those whose lives were touched by God's grace and gave us a chance to see God's grace in action. We remember by name those saints connected to St. John who died since last year's All Saints' Day. Here is a message from Pastor Steve for All Saints' Sunday.*

**Lessons for All Saints' Sunday**

**Rev. 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; Matthew 5:1-12**

**I believe ... in the communion of saints.**

When we gather for worship, we usually recite the Apostles' Creed - words that have been recited over the years, over the centuries, by the Church in worship. The Creed is a compact statement reflecting the Church's core understanding of God – God - the creator of heaven and earth, God - the only Son, God - the Holy Spirit.

We can reliably say that these are not the literal words of Jesus' first disciples. But the words reflect the understanding that emerged as the first disciples sent by Jesus, led by the Spirit, tried to make sense and find words to describe the God whom they first met in the chapters of Genesis and whom they had met personally in Jesus. Those first disciples had to make sense out of quite a bit – not just Jesus' miracles or Jesus' teachings, not just Jesus' parables that came with twists and surprise endings, but they had to make sense of the surprise ending to Jesus' life – his death on a Cross that was quickly overshadowed by the biggest surprise of all, a new beginning that started with an empty tomb.

Jesus sent these first disciples into the world to find words to tell others the Good News of a story that defied bad endings and would be the source of many new beginnings. So, with the power of the Spirit, Jesus sent them out. Did you know the Greek word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent'? Which means that the Apostles' Creed comes from Jesus' apostles. Whenever we recite it, we are stepping up as apostles, acknowledging that we are sent with them into the world on a mission from God.

I began by reciting a phrase from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Article of the Apostles' Creed - the "Holy Spirit Article". This article does not say much specifically about the Spirit - there are no titles describing the Spirit, no verbs telling us how the Spirit acts. Indeed, the article seems to be more about the Church – the 'holy, catholic church'. Here's another short Greek lesson – 'catholic' is a Greek word – meaning 'universal'. This is not the big "C" 'Catholic' that refers to a major Christian denomination.

We understand that our Creed, our statement of belief in God, leads us to say 'we believe in the Church'. For some people, looking at the history and frequent missteps of the Church through the ages, this may be a game-changer, a game stopper. "I believe in God, but I don't want to rest that belief on the Church – what it has done or hasn't done." We could imagine a person in good conscience would just skip ahead at that point in the Creed and go right to the closing words: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen." Yes, these are things I want to affirm and say I believe in: forgiveness, resurrection, life everlasting.

The Creed, the Apostles' Creed that we recite week after week in church, says, "No!" – "No – you cannot skip ahead in the Creed! You cannot skip the line about the church." Jesus did not send out copies of a creed with the words, 'forgiveness', 'resurrection', 'life everlasting' on

pieces of paper in all the languages of the world to be distributed. No, Jesus called disciples – people, men and women – out from the world to share the Good News. And, now my final Greek lesson – the Greek word for church – *ekklesia* – means ‘called out’. The disciples were called out from their places in the world. For the first disciples, that meant being called out of their fishing boats on that Galilean Sea. They were called out to receive the power of the Spirit in order to go back out, to be sent back out – as apostles - into the world to tell the world what they had come to understand about forgiveness, resurrection and everlasting life, what they had come to believe about God who creates and saves and sustains all life.

**I believe in the communion of saints.** There it is, the preamble to the line about the church. There is, indeed, a connection between the Church and the “communion of saints” that we need to see and make on All Saints’ Sunday. We are called to remember the saints – the holy ones, the ones called out by God, the ones set apart by God’s Promise. We are called to remember the sainthood that begins in Baptism. A sainthood that comes with a mission. A sainthood inextricably bound with God’s Spirit and the Church. A sainthood inextricably bound with human beings – our words and actions, our thoughts and deeds. The sainthood that brings us to the last article of the Creed where we learn one more surprising thing about God: Our God, who was willing to take the risk of the Incarnation, sending the only Son to us to suffer as a human being, was also willing to entrust the spread of the Good News of that Son to mortal human beings. Yes, with the guidance of the Spirit, God called, God sent human saints, God entrusted human saint for the task!

When we hear the word ‘saint’ we can jump right to today's picture from Revelation, chapter 7: “there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne, crying out with a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God’.” When John wrote Revelation, the church was facing persecution. He was calling for perseverance in the face of harsh opposition. He shared such pictures to remind the mortal men and women of the church of their ultimate destination, of the place where their sainthood was taking them. But John did not offer such pictures to encourage them to rest on their coming sainthood laurels. No, John was encouraging them to hold fast to their sainthood that they were still currently living out. Their earthly sainthood was still important to God.

You see, our sainthood does not begin after we die and find ourselves in the heavenly chorus. Our sainthood begins here, where we live and work, where we deal with our mortality, our human limits, our sinfulness. Our sainthood begins here where saints sing songs of praise **and** songs of lament, where we pray prayers of thanksgiving **and** confession.

For my pre-worship video, I spent some time in the St. John cemetery, thinking of the saints ‘who from their labors rest’. These are the saints who no longer share their sainthood with us on earth. We remember the saints who were part of our lives, saints who helped us understand and experience the Good News. We still have a place in our hearts for many of these saints. Yes, there are saints whose deaths left empty spaces in our lives, spaces that sometimes fill with tears and sadness. We will be praying by name for several saints who left us in this past year – Joyce Ann, Marie, Mary Lee, Dawson, Sandy, June, Tom, Eddy. We all have some other names to add to this list. This has been a particularly difficult year to lose a loved one – tending to those we care about, who were in homes or hospitals, was disrupted by the pandemic. Gatherings to remember and recall, to give thanks and Godspeed were curtailed or limited. Some of the normal ways whereby we find some closure and peace following a death were not possible. Normal disappeared - increasing our sadness. On this All Saints’ Sunday, we remember saints who have died, saints still living with grief.

Most of the gravestones have dates – a birthdate and a death date. These saints lived lives on earth. These dates remind us that each of those saints – ‘who from their labors rest’, had an earthly sainthood. Yes, they were called out by God into the church, yes, they were sent by God into the world, to live out their sainthood on earth.

We hear words from Jesus today, the beloved beatitudes from Matthew, chapter 5. In the previous chapter, Jesus began his ministry by preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” Yes, in Jesus the kingdom is near. It is not just for those who die to experience. We get to experience sainthood through Jesus now. We see in the beatitudes how Jesus’ blessings bridge our present with a promise that extends into the future.

Time and again, Jesus proclaims, “Blessed are ...” He bookends the blessings that contain future promises with a present proclamation: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” and “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

Now, Jesus’ pronouncements of blessings make it clear that the sainthood we experience as disciples and apostles of Jesus is not grounded in earthly values or ways. The saintly qualities that Jesus lifts up are not always the ones that receive earthly reward: being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker. Like those Christians hearing the words of John in Revelation, it can be hard to persevere when the world seems stacked against you and we feel so poor in spirit. But just as clearly as Jesus states those blessings, Jesus reveals promises, promises that point to a future meant to give present encouragement to saints in their earthly sainthood: comfort in grief, their fill of righteousness and mercy; indeed, they shall see God! Finally, they shall be called children of God.

This is the promise to the communion of saints. This is the promise to those who toiled, who are toiling in the mission of the church. This is the promise we proclaim when we confess our faith through the Creed: we share (we are sharing, we will share) in blessings of the life of a saint of God – forgiveness, resurrection, life everlasting.

It is All Saints’ Day – let us imagine the communion of saints, that includes saints from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, from all times and places, rejoicing together in our sainthoods, rejoicing as children of God, embracing forgiveness, resurrection and life everlasting! AMEN.