

All Saints Sunday – November 5, 2023
Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Last week I tied in the Reformation's reemphasis on the gospel, which we celebrate every year on Reformation Sunday, to the experience I had at my aunt's funeral, and I talked about how the gospel is really good news especially for those who have died. Those of you who have been anticipating our celebration of All Saints Sunday might have felt that I jumped the gun a little bit, and maybe should have saved that connection for this week, when we remember those in our lives who have died and celebrate especially those who have been examples of faith to us. Maybe that is what I should have done. Because that surely is an important emphasis of this minor festival of the church. And I don't really want to diminish that. But having done what I did last week, I want to use our remembrance today of those who have died, together with the contemplation of our own mortality that comes with that kind of remembrance, to point us not only beyond death to the life that is yet to come, but also back toward this life. I want us to remember today that the saints are not just those who have died and gone to be with God. They are also those who live right now on this side of the grave in the promise of their baptism into Christ. Here they are all around you in this room, tuning in online, and gathering together around word and sacrament in churches of all sizes and styles today all across the globe. I also want us to keep in mind the future saints whom the gospel has not yet reached in a way that has grabbed them and drawn them into the community of faith. More about that later.

But to get there, it does help to have a vision of God's future in front of us that can give us hope and confidence for that kind of a life of faith, but maybe that will also challenge our expectations. So let's talk about death just a little more by dipping into that first reading from the Book of Revelation. Because the Book of Revelation is precisely a vision of God's future, a vision of the end times when the world as we know it now will finally be transformed into what God is making it to be. The part of the vision that we are given this morning is of this great multitude of people. Who are they? They are those like the original audience for this book of Scripture who have endured suffering and difficulty because of their trust in God. They have been through the wringer. They have been through suffering and death. And they are now here gathered around the lamb. Now, you have to go back a couple of chapters to get the image that is being presented to us in this reading. This is a lamb that has been slaughtered, and yet that is alive. It's a strange image. The whole of the Book of Revelation is strange. But it is being real about the suffering that people have faced, and it is an assurance that that suffering has not been for nothing because God in Jesus Christ has been through it with them, and by his death and resurrection makes new life possible.

So this is a vision for us of life after death. But what I especially want us to notice is how different this image is from one of our favorite images of life after death. One of the most popular Gospel readings for funerals is from John 14, where Jesus talks to the disciples about his coming death, and he says this: "In my father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" The old King James translation says "many mansions," and from this we get the idea that "you get a house, and you get a house, and you get a house... *everybody* gets a house!" and God is Oprah. There was a show on Apple's streaming service a few years back called the *The Good Place* that was the story of four people who had died and gone to heaven. And heaven was this quaint little town where each of them had their own very cool house. That's all I want to say about that, except to

say that I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about in John 14. But how different is that from the image here Revelation chapter 7? This is a huge, uncountable mass of people of every kind imaginable, from all the nations of the earth, of all ethnicities and skin tones and hair styles and languages, packed in around the throne and the lamb. Notice this, because today is a day when we can be tempted to limit our view of the life that God has in store for us to a reunion with family and loved ones in our private back yards. What we have instead is an endless giant party where we will not run out of new people to meet and get to know, while still nurturing those relationships that mean so much to us now. Now, I realize that for the introverts among us this might not be the most compelling vision you could imagine. But I think even we will be alright.

As I said earlier, it is this kind of vision of God's future for us that can give us hope and confidence for life in God's present, in the here and now on this side of the grave. And it can also help us to appreciate that God is also drawing us right now into a different kind of life from what our worldly selves imagine is the good life. That is precisely why this Gospel reading is in front of us this morning. These are the Beatitudes. They are the opening to what is often called Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus paints an image for us of the Kingdom of Heaven that stands in stark contrast to the world as it is and as we expect it to be. Jesus has taken his disciples up a mountain away from the crowds that have been following Jesus, people who have been coming to him for help because they can't get help anywhere else. Jesus is talking to his disciples, but he is talking about those people down in the valley below. "These folks look like the losers of the world, but let me tell you, they are lucky to be who they are!" That's the sense of what all these "blesseds" mean. "Blessed" isn't really the best way to convey the meaning here. The idea is that "they are in a good place in their lives," despite appearances to the contrary. "Good for them," Jesus says – those poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and even-tempered, the social justice warriors, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. These are the kinds of folks who populate the Kingdom of Heaven, who will inherit the world that God is making new. These people whom the world calls unfortunate, who are often seen as a burden and an annoyance, these are the people whom God particularly cares about, and whom God is inviting you to open your eyes and your hearts to. Just know that when that happens to you, when you begin to care about them as God cares about them, you will be persecuted too. You will be reviled and slandered and despised. But good for you too!

Those people down the mountain didn't necessarily know that they were blessed, that they were fortunate to be who they were, mourning their losses, downcast at the state of the world, but striving for peace and justice, and having mercy on those in desperate circumstances. It was going to be the disciples' job to tell them when they were later sent out to make disciples of all nations, beginning at home. They are the future saints of God whom we also bear in mind today, together with those already so near and dear to us for whom we give thanks to God. So as you come forward now to light a taper in remembrance and thanksgiving for those you love, I invite you to keep in mind all whom God loves and calls into God's kingdom. And as you go back out into your daily lives this week, keep your eyes open for present and future saints out in the world, remembering that you are also one of them. May you trust in the promise of your baptism that you are God's child. May you cling to the hope of God's coming kingdom and live out that hope in word and deed. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.