All Saints Day 2017

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Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church, Brookings, SD

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The sermon text for All Saints day is Matthew 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

On this day, we thank the Lord for His mercies shown to those saints who have entered into their rest.  They are in glory and see God face to face.  Their happiness is very great, since they are removed from all troubles of this life.  Their joy is not yet completed, as they await the Resurrection of their bodies.  But there is no hint of sadness in them, only the joyous expectation of even greater glory to come.

But you are not yet there.  You are saints, yet you are very nearly the opposite of the saints in heaven.  They have been set free from every burden and sorrow.  But you are as Christ describes you: poor in spirit, meek, persecuted and slandered and insulted.  You are not in glory.  You live in pain and tears.

You are the ones who mourn.  You weep and sorrow in this life.  Many times, you have been injured by the darts and arrows of satan, barbed and sharp and poisoned; he hunts and pursues you, hoping that by the pain he inflicts, he will drive you away from your Lord. He will put apathy in your heart because someone sinned against you and hurt your heart. He will cause you to complain about God’s Word and His Church that feeds you forgiveness, clothes you with immortality, and prepares for you an eternal home. Satan’s arrows aim to steal your hope and joy away and make you mourn the loss of expectations as if they were as great as the gift of life itself.

If only the devil alone was your adversary!  But he is not alone.  The sinful world also lies in wait for you, watching for a chance to strike you.  Persecution must find you, as surely as Christ has given you a cross to bear.  For the world cannot tolerate you, and would sooner destroy you than anything else.  Since the world has hated your dear Lord, then it certainly also hates you.

You have undoubtedly been hurt by the world before, and you will again.  Perhaps even you have been injured by your fellow believers.  Sometimes, those wounds sting the most.

To make matters worse, you must do battle against your own sinful flesh.  You must grapple and wrestle against yourself, since your old nature is you.  You must deny yourself, you must beat your body into shape, you must fight the good fight, and you must fight it against yourself.

In all these battles, you must endure hardship and pain.  You must be struck again and again, as Christ was struck.  Yet He did not cry out, and perhaps you also will carry sorrow in your heart without giving any outward sign.  "Blessed are those who mourn," yet not necessarily with visible tears.

For a time, you must be one of the downtrodden saints in this world, since you do not set your heart upon this life.  True, you may take comfort and pleasure here and there from the blessings God gives in this world.  Yet your heart is set upon things above, and a treasure that does not fade or rust.  Your inheritance is in heaven and the life to come.

Therefore, you do not make idols out of earthly things.  Your God and your object of worship is Christ, who remains yet unseen.  Your home is a future hope, yet unseen.  You live by faith, not sight in a world that seeks to cloud and distort your faith and hope.

The religion of Christ is not to improve your life here on earth, though receiving His word and sacrament does improve your peace here on earth among the assailants of the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh.  You do not work to create a visible, earthly kingdom, but rather you belong to the hidden kingdom that God has already created.  In the same way, your God is not a slave whom you order around - "Fetch me this!" "Fetch me that!" - in order to make this life comfy and soft.

Instead, you are called to live in the image of your Lord, who made Himself poor and meek, who was insulted and slandered because of His Name.  You, like He, must be always different than you appear to the eyes of men.  Although He looked only like a poor carpenter's son, He was the all-glorious Son of the Almighty.  So you also are sons of God and sons of Light, waiting to be revealed in glory on the Last Day.  Now, in this life, no halo adorns your head to identify you as a saint.

Until the Last Day, you wait - hidden, often sorrowful of heart, afflicted by sins and trials every day.  Oh, how you long to be freed from every temptation and weakness of your sinful flesh!  Oh, how you hunger and thirst to be filled with the holiness of God so that the last remnants of iniquity may be cleansed away!  You are at the same time both burdened down by a crushing load of sin, yet also completely delivered from guilt by the precious Blood of the Lamb of God.

You must live in this tension of sinner and saint until you die.  You must live in great contradictions.  You will mourn, yet you also rejoice and are glad for you know how great your reward in heaven is.  You yearn to only rejoice all the time, for so great is the salvation that Christ has won for you, and so great is your reward in heaven.  Yet this corrupt, death-filled world must still weigh heavily upon you.  You are immortal creatures who possess the kingdom of heaven even now.  Yet your flesh is dying, and the grave awaits you and all whom we love.

Take comfort, therefore, in the Word of Jesus.  He shows you what is yours by right, and He promises what you shall receive.  Do not look to what is visible and corruptible, distorted by sin.  Look to the words and promises of your Savior.  He has purchased Paradise for you with His death.  He has secured the second Earth as your inheritance, as surely as He has given you the adoption as sons of God.  He was lifted up on the Cross so that you will be lifted up on the clouds to be with Him in glory.

Blessed are you who are poor in spirit and who mourn. Instead of facing this dying world with hopelessness, you know that you will be raised from the dead. Blessed are you in your meek and hungering state, you know that your satisfaction comes at the Resurrection. Blessed are you who are merciful because you know the mercy delivered to you by the forgiveness won at the cross. Blessed are you who are pure in heart not because you managed to somehow take away your sin but because of the new heart He has created in you with the promise that in your new heart and flesh, you will see God with your own eyes. Blessed are you who, peacemaker, for the Lord has made you His child. Yes, even blessed are you when are persecuted for the Name of Christ. Repent, rejoice and be glad. The kingdom is heaven is yours and that hope will not be taken away.

You can earn none of the blessings He gives, for they are eternal and priceless. They are yours because you are saints.  If you are merciful, it is only because the mercy of Christ has worked in you.  If you are pure of heart, it is only because the spotless Lamb has cleansed you thoroughly from every blemish.  If you make peace, it is only through the royal proclamation of the Prince of Peace.  To Him alone is all the glory, because He alone is the source of all good things.

Therefore, do not fix your eyes on what is visible.  Do not pay too much attention to this sorrowful life.  If you do, in despair you may conclude that God does not love you.  But look past the sorrow and decay, and see instead the face of God in Christ your Savior.  See who He is and what He has done.  He is love and grace.  He abounds in blessing and mercy.  The face of God is Christ, and Christ can only be truly recognized by looking at the cross.  To understand God, see His sacrifice and the salvation He has created for you.  See the awesome wonder of God who suffers, God who bleeds, God who dies.  Then you will also see the future with undiminished joy in a cold, still tomb that stands open and empty.  Resurrection is your future, because the cross is yours now.

So be patient in your trials.  Do not despair at the burdens you must carry.  The momentary troubles of this life are not worth comparing with the glory that is to come.  Continue to pray with all the Church of God: Come quickly, Lord Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding, guard and keep your hearts in Christ Jesus. Amen.