

5 November 2006  
The Festival of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Real Saints are Poor in Spirit”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12; Isaiah 26; Revelation 21-22

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Judging by all the political campaign ads being run on TV these days, everyone running for office is a saint, and their opponent is the biggest sinner in the world. So vote for the saint if you want your world to be a better place.

Actually, that's not too far away from how many people in our world think of Heaven, and their “campaign” to get in. For if God is going to let so many people into Heaven (and His is the only vote that matters!), then I'll get in because I'm not as big a sinner as a lot of people. In fact, by comparison, *I'm a saint!* God, vote for me.

And so it's good that we have a day like All Saints Day. Not only to remember, celebrate, and honor those believers, those saints of God, who have gone before us into the eternal rest and peace of Heaven, but also to remind us what a saint really is: a sinner made holy by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; washed white in the blood of the Lamb. (Introit) And so today we separate the Scriptural wheat from the worldly chaff, and base our assurance of Heaven not in the *vague* hope that God will vote for me and let me in, but in the *sure and certain* hope of my Saviour Jesus Christ. The certainty of His atonement and His *promise* of eternal life for all who trust in Him (John 3:16; Mark 16:16). That you may know that this election is already over! And that you don't have to troll for His vote – He's already chosen you (Eph 1:3-6; 1 Thess 1:4-5), died and risen for you, and given you His Spirit and faith to join you to Him. That you, dear children and *saints* of God in Christ, have nothing to fear.

And so the beautiful pictures of Heaven that we heard in the first two readings is what awaits you. The beautiful city, like a jewel. A city whose gates are never shut, because there is no enemy to keep out – just peace, always. The Lamb of God providing light, and no darkness of sin and death ever again. The water of life, the Tree of Life – all is life. Constant life. Real life. Life . . . very unlike life here, now! For life here, now, because of sin (Romans 6:23), is *really* an unrelenting march toward death, though it was never intended to be. And so life now, life as we know it, is a temporary thing. It is interrupted

by death. Loved ones die suddenly, or slowly. We watch as the ravages of disease take their toll on us. We see friends on the edge, kept alive by only a multitude of tubes and machines. It's even as simple as the awareness that our bodies are growing older, and breaking down, and wearing out, and *won't* last forever.

But that is life with a little l, and all this death here is death with a little d. Yes, it looms large to us now, and is often frightening, and always sad. But for all the saints, for all who die with faith in Christ, this death is but the gate to life (Ps 118). Big L, life. Real life. Eternal life. The beautiful life of Heaven, which does not break down or wear out, that is not ravaged by sickness or disease, and has no end in death, but is *a constant living*. A constant living for all who in Christ have been re-created to live a new life. . . . And so as sad as death is here, now, there is a worse death. Big death. Big D, death. The death that is the very opposite of eternal life. For if eternal life is real life, the life that will never end, then big death is the real death, the death that will never end. The death *after* little death. Not an annihilation, a ceasing to live – but *a constant dying*.

Sadly, we sometimes get those two deaths mixed up, being more afraid of little death than big death. And when we do that, we also get our *lives* mixed up, thinking more highly of our life here and now, and treasuring the things of this world, rather than looking forward to the promises of God in Christ Jesus, and the life that is to come.

And I think the confusion is understandable. We tend to trust what we can see. But today we are being directed differently, to trust what we *cannot* see. To trust the *promises* of God. And to trust that often times what we see in this world is the exact opposite of how God sees things. And that the saints of God here and now usually don't look like saints at all.

And it is the Beatitudes from Matthew that show us this, for they do not paint a pretty picture of the blessed in this world. In fact, those who are blessed are often those who seem cursed. For who are the blessed? Those not rich in spirit but poor in spirit. Not the joyful but those who mourn. Not the high and proud but the lowly and meek. Not those who are satisfied and confident with their spiritual life, but those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Those who are persecuted, cursed, reviled, hated, and live a life filled with pain and difficulty! These are mine, Christ says. My saints. My blessed ones.

To which those trolling for God's vote for them now say, "*Huh?*" How can this be? Aren't those like this far behind in the polls and have a lot of catching up to do?

Actually no. Rather, it is a constant reminder to us that the saints of God are not of this world. That we live now as strangers and foreigners in this world. It is a constant

reminder to us not to mix up this life with the next, or this death with the next. And so it has been for all the saints. Consider **Isaiah**, who we heard from in the Old Testament reading. He is persecuted for speaking God's Word and (according to tradition [Heb 11:37]) was killed by being sawed in two. Consider **John**, who we heard from in Revelation, reviled and hated so much that he is exiled to the island of Patmos. And what of the **early Christian martyrs**, brutally killed and slaughtered for the faith. And the **unsung heroes** of each generation, those whose names we have forgotten, or perhaps have never known. But their Saviour knew them – one and all! – and does not forget. Their Saviour who was rejected more than any and then killed, that He might be the Resurrection and the Life. (John 11:25) Come to take our sins upon Himself, that they be not on us. Come to take our death into Himself, that dying and rising for us, death have not the last word, but life. Big L, life. Eternal life.

That is why both Isaiah and John, in writing their beautiful pictures of Heaven, focus not so much on Heaven, but on Christ and their confidence in Him. And so Isaiah writes: ***“We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks.”*** But what is this salvation that protects us? In Hebrew the word is *Yeshuah* – you know it better by its Greek equivalent: Jesus. It is Jesus who is our hope, or as we heard Luther put it last week, *Our Mighty Fortress!* And for John, as wonderful as His description of Heaven is, it is the Lamb that makes it glorious. The Lamb is the center of all He writes about.

And so too for you and me. Our future is not dependent on us, on anything that we do or can do. But on Christ. On what He has done. On what He gives to us. And it is the very first Beatitude that shows us that, for did you ever wonder why ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?”*** It is because *this is the posture of all the saints* – coming to our God and Father in poverty; coming to our Saviour with hands empty and in complete need; coming sinful and begging for mercy. We are Lazarus sitting by the rich man's gate. (Luke 16) We are the blind and the lepers, crying out for mercy. We are the Canaanite woman, begging for the crumbs from the table. (Matt 15:27) Yes, that is the picture of us, as we really are. When we don't try to compare ourselves with others.

*And ours is the kingdom of Heaven*, for to us who have nothing is given everything. In Christ. For He is the One, the very Son of God, who having everything, for our sakes became nothing, that we who are poor might be rich. (2 Cor 8:9) And so we come with empty lives, and are given fullness of life in Him. We come lowly and are lifted up. We come mourning our sin and are given the joy of sins forgiven. We come hungry and thirsty and our mouths are filled with His body and blood. We come hated, reviled, and persecuted, and He opens His mouth to us and says: you are my beloved son, my beloved daughter. You are blessed.

And if we are blessed by Him, then even though the world despise us, hate us, and persecute us; then even if we be lowly and poor; then even if we *appear cursed* – if we are blessed by Him, then blessed we are! *Truly* blessed, though what we are now be hidden. For far more important than what you hold now in your hands, is to be held in His hands. His nail-pierced hands. Who, if He takes away from you now, gives back even more. Who, if He takes away from you now, does so to focus your eyes and faith not on the here and now, but on Him. Who, if He takes away from you now, points to His cross and empty tomb, that you may know that though the grave awaits you now, it cannot hold you. For as you are in Him and He in you, *just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity* (Small Catechism: Explanation to the Second Article), **so will you.**

So in the end, you don't have to prove yourself to God, that He may vote for you – God proved His love and faithfulness to you by dying for you. And it is this work, His work, that makes saints, when by grace through faith His forgiveness, life, and salvation are given to you. So fear not, you are blessed. Fear not, though there be tears and pain now. Fear not, for you are among the host arrayed in white. This day is your day. Yes, already now, in Christ Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.