

3 November 2019
The Feast of All Saints

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Seeing Blessedness Differently”

Text: Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

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

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

Old people and young people.

Professionals and blue collar workers.

The rich and refugees.

An old man who died in hospice care and an infant who never made it out of the womb.

Prison guards and prisoners.

Doctors and overdose victims.

Parents and children.

The well-educated and the uneducated.

Divorcees and orphans.

Those who were apostles and those who were abandoned.

Murderers and martyrs.

The well-known and the unknown.

The Eskimo and the African.

Those who lived BC and those who lived AD.

The hearing and the deaf.

The prince and the pauper.

All present. All equal. Standing side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder. One. United.

What do they all have in common? Not much, you might say. But this: sin. And death. For as we heard last week: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3). The family tree of sin skips no generation, no person. And the wages of sin is death (Romans 6).

But we heard this too, today. Something else they all have in common. They are ***clothed in white robes***. For ***they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb***. Robes once black and filthy with sin, now washed white by the red blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. From the family tree of sin they have been grafted into the family tree of Jesus, and so are all sons of God. Sins forgiven. Grace received. **For the wages of Jesus' death is life.**

So they all have this in common too: they're all saints. God's saints. Made saints by Him.

You couldn't see it, though, in this life. They looked just like everyone else. Like sons of men not saints; not sons of God. What we are and will be is hidden now. Just as it was with Jesus. A Nazarene. A Galilean. Joseph's son. By sight.

But this great multitude is different now. And they now see what could not before be seen. And we will one day join them and see. And when we do, that person on your right and your left, in front of you and behind you, when you're in that great multitude . . . you just might be surprised. Don't underestimate the power of the Word and Spirit of God. There is no one too sinful. No one too far gone. Good news for you and me. That as John said, *everyone who thus hopes in him* - Jesus - *purifies himself as he is pure*. Everyone. Hope in Jesus, faith in Jesus, receives Him and is purified in Him; is sainted in Him.

But why is this all hidden now? Why so much sin and sadness now? Why not more blessed now? Why doesn't Jesus take better care of His own? many would ask.

But who says He's not? Maybe we're just thinking about it wrong. Measuring wrong. Sinful minds don't always get what God is doing or understand His ways. So maybe we question because we don't know what blessed really is.

For we tend, I think, to think of blessed as sort of heaven on earth. To be blessed is to have no tears or sorrow. To not be in want. To have our heart's desires. To be healthy and strong and successful and happy. Always. Or at least, most of the time.

But Jesus thinks and speaks very differently than that. For if those are the things we set our hearts on, the things we want God to give us more than we want Him, then they are false gods, and we are not blessed at all. Not really. And that's what happens in this world and life, isn't it? That's where the great multitudes are here. Standing around the thrones of happiness, success, health, wealth, strength, and ease.

But how differently Jesus thinks and speaks of what it means to be blessed. The Beatitudes - that list of blessed that we heard from Matthew - **sound strange to our ears because they are strange to our hearts**. Our hearts that are often too short-sighted, too here and now. But our Father always has the long-term in mind, eternity, and is leading us toward that; working us toward that.

And so All Saints Day is good not only for us to rejoice, to *comfort us who mourn*, as one of the Beatitudes says. But to re-orient our hearts and minds. To set our faith compass back to true north. To set our minds on things above, on things that last beyond this world and life. And that blessed is not what we do or what we have, but what God does. In Jesus. For He is not only the one who blesses, He is the blessed one, and the very embodiment of the Beatitudes. All that we are He becomes, so that all that He is be given

to us. And we be blessed - not so much with *what* He gives, but as He gives *Himself* to us.

And so the Beatitudes are blessings like no other because His is a kingdom like no other, and He is a King like no other.

A King who joins the slave in slavery.

Who mourns with us who mourn.

Who doesn't demand His rights but comes and serves.

Who has everything and leaves it all behind.

Who doesn't demand but mercies.

Who loves the loveless.

Who even joins us in death and lies in our grave.

And who is reviled and mocked for doing just this.

But exactly there is our blessing. Not having a perfect, trouble-free, healthy and wealthy, always happy and joyful life. But rather this: that wherever you are, in whatever your struggle, the blessed one is with you. With you with His forgiveness and life. To pull you through. For you are too weak. You are too sinful. But He is not. And so He comes. To pull you through. That you be one of ***those coming out*** - being pulled out - ***of the great tribulation***. By His strength, not yours. His life, not yours. His holiness, not yours.

But yes, yours! For He gives you His. His life. His holiness. The blood of the Lamb washing you clean in the Font, in the gift of Absolution, at the Altar. For here, where Jesus comes down to us with His gifts is where heaven is on earth. And so that ***great multitude that no one could number*** is not just there, but here, too. It's just that those in glory have received the fullness of blessedness. Us, not yet. *We feebly struggle, they in glory shine* (LSB #677, v. 4). But that day is coming for us. When Jesus will pull us through death and the grave to where there is only life.

And Jesus did that for how many this year? How many saints? Some who lived but a few hours. Some who lived a long life. Some quickly. Some slowly and with great difficulty. Some alone. Some surrounded by loved ones.

It's always difficult for us. For what we see is the separation, the pain, the death, the finality of it. But All Saints Day would teach us to see as Jesus sees. That in Him, death is but sleep, and the grave but the gate to everlasting life. That blessed are those who have Him and are in Him, no matter what you look like or have here.

That's a hard lesson to learn. For our hearts keep tugging us back to the things of this world, and to think of our blessedness in them - in what we have and see. So maybe a little trouble is good for us. Maybe a little ***poor in spirit*** and ***mourning*** and ***persecution*** is just what we need to keep us focused on true blessedness. Maybe some ***mercy*** and ***peacemaking*** is just right to keep me from focusing too much on me. To learn to see as Jesus sees. To see Him pulling us through. To see Him blessing us even now.

And to give thanks. For those who left us this year. Who left this veil of tears and are now in that great multitude in the fullness of blessedness.

And to look forward to when that day will come for us. When all God's promises to you are fulfilled. When you move from this side of the altar, the side we see, to the other side, the side we cannot - but that is no less real. Until that day, we gather here, with *the angels and archangels and yes, all the company of heaven* around the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Who takes away your sin and gives you His forgiveness, life, and salvation. To you. Here. Now. To you. And so blessed. Saint. You.

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.