<u>**All Saints' 2017 A**</u>
Dove of Peace Lutheran Church
Pastor Stephen Springer
November 5, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On the first page of the Bible, Genesis describes how God created the universe in six days. And on the seventh, God rested. And Genesis says, this, "So God blessed the seventh day and *hallowed* it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." The seventh day– according to our current, contemporary translation of the Bible– is blessed and *hallowed*. Made holy.

Hallowed. A strange, old English word. We get "Halloween" from it. It means to make something holy. In our congregation, we use an old-fashioned translation of the Lord's Prayer at the early service: *Hallowed by thy name.* And then at the late service, we use a contemporary translation: *Hallowed be your name.* They changed the "thy" to "your" but they kept the old English word *hallowed*. As did the translators of our Bible in the 1980's. In contemporary English we do not have a verb form of the word "holy." So old English "hallowed" is used when we want to say become holy, make holy, keep holy. "*So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*" The first time that the word is used in the Bible. *Qadash* is used 173 times in the Old Testament. And its Greek equivalent *hagios* is used 229 times in the New Testament. Important in the Old Testament, where it is on the first page. Even more important in the New Testament, where it is on the last page.

It was the Apostle Paul who used that word to describe us, the members of the body of Christ, as the holy ones. Which is translated saint. It is a peculiarity of English and the Germanic languages that we use a Latin word, "saint," to describe the holy ones, the members of Christ's church. Meanwhile, we use German word, holy, for the exact same concept in all other cases.

So all of us church folk are familiar with these expressions: *The Holy Spirit*. (Or the Holy Ghost.) We're familiar with that part of the liturgy that comes from the song of the seraphim in the Old Testament: *Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might.* We're familiar with the Lord's prayer: *Hallowed be your name*. And for some period of time in the British Isles our language kept the connection. Because you and I – all the Christians– for a while we were called *All Hallows*. That's how we got the word Halloween, right? All Hallows' Eve? And in the French language, and the Spanish language, and the Italian language– because they are not Germanic– their languages preserve the connection, the commonality, of the holiness of God and the holiness of God's people. But in English, linguistically, the connection is lost.

So for a moment, I ask you to consider the meaning of "holy." Let's think about the biblical foundation of All Saints' Day. That's a very Reformation thing to do, isn't it? Instead of speculating, trying to understand the concept in the scriptures that supposedly underlie everything we believe.

And the biblical idea of "holy" is when things are set apart for a special reason. Almost always for a good reason. As I said, on page one of the Bible, "*So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*" The first use of the word holy. God made the sabbath special. He blessed it. He set it aside.

In the majesty of the Hebrew Bible– the Old Testament– we mortals are sort of neutral. And we would enter into these holy spaces– like the temple– and avoid work on the these holy occasions – like the sabbath and Passover– and see these holy things– like the Ark of the Covenant, like the serpent lifted up in the wilderness– and so from our *ordinary* lives we would occasionally touch the *extraordinary* world of God. And in the Law of Moses, if we touch something unclean– if we are contaminated by blood, or we eat the wrong animal, or have the wrong kind of sex– then we become unclean and unfit to enter the realm of the holy. Unable to enter the temple, unable to observe the holy day, unable to be blessed by holy things. Because we would be unclean. And there was usually a remedy to fix that, in the Law of Moses, a remedy so that again we could become fit to partake in the realm of the holy.

So holy first meant set apart. Set apart by God for special use. And holy second meant pure. Not contaminated. And a related part of holiness meant complete. Unbroken. Unblemished. Intact. And in the Old Testament that meant that whole categories of people or human conditions were excluded from holy places and holy occasions. Lepers for example. Men who had been castrated, called eunuchs. People with tattoos.

But it was from that concept of completeness and unbrokenness that when Christianity intersected with pagan Germanic culture, the word that got chosen to translate this biblical idea was "holy" which is related to the word whole. And that's an apt translation. A word suggesting consecration, that holy means "set apart"– that *could* have been chosen. A word suggesting purity, that holy means "clean"– that *might* have been chosen. But wholeness, unbrokenness, completeness– this is the aspect of holiness that the Germanic peoples emphasized when they chose their word "holy" to translate this ancient Hebrew concept, and the Latin concept of *sanctus*.

It's unfortunate how our contemporary word "saint" has come to mean a goody-goody. It has taken on a moral meaning that isn't really in the Bible. And our casual use of the word "saint" over-emphasizes the Old Testament concept of clean and unclean, which Jesus was always quick to correct. In today's gospel, the Beatitudes, Jesus does not say, "Blessed are the pure." But rather, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Jesus also hastened to touch lepers, to allow hemorrhaging women to touch him, and to drink from the jar of a Gentile woman. So we draw the wrong conclusion about sainthood when we think of an elite group that stands apart from the

rest of humanity.

The writers of the Bible understand holiness to be a condition that is decreed by God and created by God. And Paul– who used the word "saint" far more than any other writer of the Bible– for Paul, saints are decreed by God and created by God. Sainthood is not something to boast about. But sainthood is conferred because God sets us apart. For special good. Just as on page one, God set aside the seventh day and hallowed it. So that it would provide rest, and teaching, and memory. So God sets us aside, for special good.

And finally, the writers of the Bible understood holiness to be the condition of wholeness and wellness, of completion and restoration. When we think of our departed loved ones as saints, I think it is important to go back to biblical roots of that word. Which is that our loved ones are *holy*– whole now, and complete, in the presence of God.

I said that the Bible has holiness on the first page. And holiness on the last page. This is the last sentence of the Bible, Revelation chapter 22, verse 21. *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.* God's grace to all the holy ones, to all hallows. A good way to end the Bible. A good way to end a sermon on All Saints' Sunday. *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.*