

## All Saints C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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November 6, 2022

Ephesians 1:11-23

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

Dear Friends:

In the summer of 1505, Martin Luther was studying law. He was going to become a lawyer. He was traveling overland between his home and his law school. A fifty mile journey on foot. And on the pathway a summer thunderstorm arose. And there was thunder. And lightning struck nearby. And Martin Luther prayed to Saint Anne. And told her that if she saved him, he would become a monk. And after the storm was gone, and Luther was still alive, he kept his promise. And became a monk.

In the early 1950s, Danny Thomas was a struggling entertainer. And he wasn't sure if he was going to succeed. And so he prayed to the patron saint of lost causes. And Danny Thomas promised the saint that if he became a success, he would build a shrine to that saint. Do you know who that saint was? Do you know what that shrine was? The first St. Jude hospital for children was opened in Memphis.

Through the centuries, many Christians have prayed to the saints, asking them for help. Some, like Martin Luther and Danny Thomas, have even made a vow to a saint. Here in the borderlands, the original inhabitants still practice the tradition of *milagros*, which are little metallic objects that are placed in the shrines of various saints whenever that saint has answered a prayer. If you prayed to Saint Luke to heal a broken leg, then you might take a little silver ornament, crafted to look like a crutch, and hang that little ornament at the shrine of Saint Luke. And everyone who visits that church or shrine can see the dozens or hundreds of ornaments bearing witness to all of the miracles that Saint Luke has performed. *Milagros*.

In religion and in anthropology, this is called the "cult of saints." Traditionally, Protestantism takes a dismal view of the cult of saints. There are many good reasons, and perhaps a few bad reasons, why the Protestant Reformation took an axe to the cult of saints. One of the principal good reasons is that by the late middle ages, Jesus had become not a loving savior, but a vengeful judge. And so among common people, the saints were mediators, friendlier than Jesus, and more down-to-earth than Jesus. Mary, the mother of God, and the other saints, were sort of the backdoor entrance to heaven, while a wrathful Lord Jesus blocked the front door. It's not the case that the Reformation hated Mary and the saints. But the Reformation was very determined to correct the image of the vengeful and wrathful Jesus.

It's striking— at least to me— how the apostle Paul uses the word "saint." Paul did not know the

word Christian. That word did not yet exist in his time and place. Paul never used the word Christian, nor did Paul ever use the word disciple. And so he used the word saints, which means holy ones, to describe the ordinary people of the church. Paul says “greet the saints” and he means “say hi to everybody.” In Paul’s writing, a saint is the opposite of what a saint was in the middle ages. In the middle ages, the saints were the celebrity Christians. The high achievers, the over achievers. In Paul’s letters, the saints are very ordinary.

And in some cases, the saints are needy. In our second reading today, in the letter to the Ephesians, it says, “*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.*” Ephesians is talking about saints as the recipients of love. People who need a little help or a little understanding. Later in Ephesians, we can read this astonishing advice: *Persevere in supplication for all the saints.* Ephesians 6:18. Now *that* is a great Bible verse. The medieval teaching is that the saints are great Christians who pray for us ordinary Christians. But Ephesians says *WE* should be constantly praying for the saints. The saints need us! And Paul was also collecting money for the saints. When he uses the word saints, he’s often talking about some poor believers in Jerusalem who depended on the generosity of wealthier Christians. So in Paul’s world, the saints are usually the unnamed members of the church, and they are usually in need. Not always. But often they are in need of love, of prayer, and of resources. And Paul’s word is “the holy ones.” It’s *hagios*. The holy ones. Which is *sanctus* in Latin, from which we get the English word saint.

So the point is, when we actually look at what saints are in the Bible, they are the everyday Christians. They are not the superstars. So that’s the Bible. And then, when we look at the historical origins of All Saints Day, it was originally a bucket to collect any saints who had been overlooked. The big saints have calendar days devoted to them. March 17 is for Patrick of Ireland. October 4 is for Francis of Assisi. This coming Friday, November 11, is Martin of Tours. For whom Martin Luther was named. The big saints have their days. But in case we forgot anyone, we have this day called All Saints.

So when we look at where all of this came from, in the Bible it comes from Paul, for whom the holy ones were simply ordinary, unnamed Christians. And when we look at liturgy and the church calendar, this was kind of an acknowledgment that we don’t always recognize and acknowledge all the saints. But we get a chance to do that on this day. And that seems to me to be the Protestant way to do this. The Roman Catholic way is to have two days: All Saints on November 1<sup>st</sup>. And All Souls on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Protestant way is that all Christian souls are saints, based on the way the Bible uses the term. So really for Protestants, All Saints and All Souls are the same thing. Or ought to be same thing. And I think the spirit of the All Souls procession in Tucson is exactly right. Because people remember their departed loved ones. They are walking carrying a picture of their grandmother. *This is my grandmother. This is what she was about. This is what I learned from her. This is why I honor her. This is why she is my saint.* It could be your departed sibling, or child, or spouse, or uncle or cousin.

I think the divine reality of God is that all goodness is known by God. And all goodness is

redeemed and kept by God forever. That's a great truth, a very happy piece of the Gospel. One of the members of our congregation who died just this week was named Joella Schultz. She had been living in northern Arizona for the last few years. She had dementia. Dementia takes away so much. And that's why we fear it. And it can be painful to witness. Not always. But it can be very difficult. However. All of that lived life has been banked into God. All the good things, all the joyful moments, all the small acts of kindness. Your father, who sees in secret, knows these things. And cherishes them and keeps them forever. That's true for dementia. And it's true for aging and death.

Our 2006 hymnal contains a new hymn that acknowledges dementia. [#792] The first stanza is about dementia. And the second stanza is about bodies growing old. But the third stanza is the one that says what I want to say. Only says it better than I can. *Within your Spirit, goodness lives unfading. The past and future mingle into one. All joys remain, unshadowed light pervading. No valued deed will ever be undone. Your mind enfolds all finite acts and off'rings. Held in your heart, our deathless life is won.*

In the middle ages, the cult of the saints was linked to a medieval doctrine of good works. The saints were super holy people who had done so many good works, that they had exceeded the amount of good works required to enter heaven. There was a surplus of good works in the bank, and those of us who were less saintly, could pay our spiritual bills with some of the surplus that was in the bank. Well, that was all nuts. And that's what started the 95 Theses and the Reformation, and here we are today. But the idea of God as a bank that keeps our good works, and our good ideas, and our best selves— I think that's a great concept. And that from that bank we can draw courage and inspiration. I think that's a great concept. The church isn't the bank. God is the bank. And all the good things, all the joyful moments, all the small acts of kindness—that's the gold that he keeps and never loses. And on All Saints Day, we ought to remember that especially for the forgotten ones, the overlooked ones, the quiet ones. The ones that Paul calls the saints. Amen.