

The Feast of All Saints November 1 (observed on Sunday, Nov. 6)

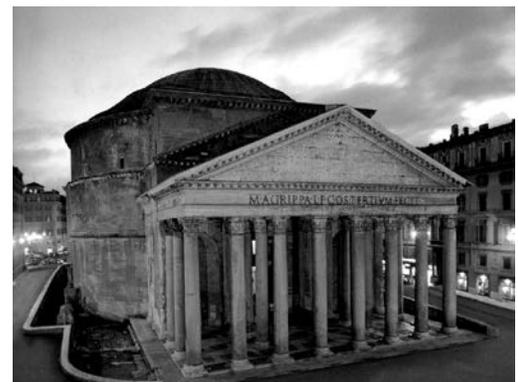
This is also the Sunday of Prayer for the Persecuted Church – How might we connect that to the feast? Of course this is easy, the festival started out as a festival for all the martyrs of Rome.

All Saints is one of the feasts of the Church year which occupies the second rank of festivals, after the great trio of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, All Saints Day runs in the pack with Trinity, Ascension, Epiphany, and a few select other festivals. In Roman Catholic circles these were days of general obligation, when every congregation was obliged to observe the festival. This was not true for the many festivals which dot the calendar of the liturgical year. After all, if one observed them all, there would be time for little else. Not even the monastic communities which gather daily observe them all. A parish or community would observe some, often a local saint's feast, the patron of the parish, etc. But they all observed this one.

This festival has a most interesting history. Running strongly through the whole thing is a baptism of Pagan culture. The Christians were not fighting against the culture as much as they were adapting it, fitting it into the Christian sphere. This has long been the genius of Christianity, it is not rigidly tied to one culture. Where Hinduism or Islam often has a difficult time crossing cultural divides, Christianity has seemed to be particularly adaptable in this. Now, that is not to say that every Christian sitting in an LCMS pew this Sunday is good at this. Christianity also has its cultural brakemen as well. Contrary to the accounts of his life I grew up with, St. Boniface (Wynfrith) spent much of his career wresting already baptized Christians out of pagan practices and into what he saw as normative Christian behavior and worship. He was not fond of recycled pagan elf-prayers in church or services conducted at sites sacred to Thunor, one of the Saxon deities. He was the Apostle to the Saxons and this may explain some behaviors we see in the LCMS today – being largely made up of Saxons.

The general promulgation of the feast seems to be tied to the reception of an important building in the city of Rome. It seems that as the temples of the pagans were emptied by the reality of Christian conversions, several of them were given to the Christian bishop in Rome. One of them was the Pantheon of Rome, a remarkable building which for many centuries was the largest dome in the west. Even today, we are not entirely certain how they did it.

It is still standing after over fifteen hundred years later, which is more than I can say for any of the buildings in which I have ever worshiped. It appears that they creatively used progressively lighter and lighter stones as they built successive courses of the dome, until the top is made of something very like the pumice which will float if you throw it in a pool of water. This past January and February I was able to visit this site and it is quite dramatic. Make sure it is on your Roman itinerary.



This important building was given to the Bishop of Rome in the seventh century, at the height of the Roman stationary liturgies. The pope at the time did not quite know what to do with it, since it had been dedicated to all the gods (pan-theon). He made a rather bold decision. It was dedicated to all the saints, especially the many martyrs who had died in Rome. He essentially created a new festival for the rededication of the building, a festival set aside for all the saints, sort of a catch-all day when those whose feasts had not been observed could be celebrated. Initially this happened in the spring of the year, during the season of Easter. This is the first baptizing of culture – in this case Roman culture.

The second baptism of culture would happen shortly thereafter, but it would not be Roman this time, but the culture of the barbarians who had invaded the German provinces of the Roman Empire. The feast day was moved to November, most likely because of the stubborn paganism of the northern Europeans. These Saxons, Frisians, and Vikings had only begun to be evangelized. They had pagan “day of the dead” sort of festival which fell at this time. We have to admit that some of this is speculation, but it appears the church moved the feast of All Saints to compete with this day of the dead festival which would fall on Nov 1. The pagans seem to have understood that on this night the world of the dead came close to the world of the living, allowing some deceased access to this world to seek revenge and torment the living.

This use of a festival to combat a pagan festival was not new to the Church. Sometime earlier, in much the same way, Christmas seems to have been located on Dec 25 to combat the pagan Saturnalia, a Roman festival which involved much drunkenness and excessive amounts of fun in the eyes of our 3rd and 4th century bishops. One still sees some remnants of the pagan festival in our All Saints (All Hallows) celebrations. The hollowing out of a gourd, carving a face and putting a lit candle inside was an attempt to ward off evil spirits. Costumes may have been an attempt to hide identity lest the dead come back and terrorize the living. We should be very clear, the day of the dead in ancient culture was not something which was celebrated. These people were afraid. Some sought to control it, the shamans and others, but most of the people seem to have been afraid of what this night brought.

When you consider what the Christians of the first millennium did with this, it is rather breathtaking. They did not keep these pagans and their festival at the periphery, at arm’s length so to speak. They took what was a rather sordid sort of a pagan festival, a day of the dead when evil spirits were thought to roam the land, and they brought it right into the Lord’s Supper. In a sense, they took the pagan fear of the departed and said, “don’t be afraid of these people, let’s have dinner with them.” For in the sacrament of the altar which is a key element of the day, the Christian says that he is having dinner not only with the folks in the room, with the people who are alive and of the faith, but also with all the blessed in the heavenly realms. As the prefatory prayers say, “with angels and archangels **and with all the company of heaven** we laud and magnify your glorious name, ever more praising you and saying...” and then we launch in to the

songs of the Seraphim in Isaiah 6 and the people of Jerusalem as they acknowledge God's presence.

All this brings us to the rather interesting topic of whether our North American manifestation of Christianity has that sort of flexibility? Can we baptize an element of the culture in a way which allows us to bring it into the fold? Have we ossified to the extent that our understanding of Christianity is so wrapped up in the cultural aspects that we cannot adapt? If we could, what sort of things in our culture could be "baptized" and made Christian? In many smaller communities the Friday night high school football game has virtually become the substitute for Church and fellowship. How might we adapt that? How might we claim that as a Christian expression? Should we? What about our cities? Are there events or practices which have no Christian connotation which could be "baptized" in this way? I think this has much to say about the way we fight over music in worship and the way that we struggle with effectively retaining a whole generation of young people.

One of our overseas recipients who spend some time in the US commented that he felt that we were succumbing to culture in the US and he felt that the clearest place to see this was in Halloween. He was appalled that the parishes he visited were far more focused on Halloween than they were on Reformation Day and its themes of Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, etc. Are we in fact not baptizing culture but submitting to it? Of course one can observe Reformation day in a way which simply puts Lutheran culture over Christ himself. Triumphalist celebration of our proper theology can be just as much a problem as immersion in the ghostly culture of Halloween.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a famous theologian of the past century put Christianity's relationship into a number of categories which have been important for the discussion for several decades.

Christ against culture (The Christian community rejects the culture)

Christ of culture (All of culture is seen as essentially Christian and celebrated as such)

Christ above culture (Culture is perceived as something good but which can never be a true expression of Christianity. Catholicism often approaches culture this way.)

Christ in tension with culture. (Many see Luther in this sort of a stance – culture held at arm's length and yet necessary.)

Christ the transformer of culture (John Calvin might be an exemplar here. He saw the church changing the whole of culture into a holy communion on earth.)

This idea is not without its critics, but it is really the starting point for many discussions of the role of Christianity in relationship to the culture.

Collect of the Day Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant

us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

For the preacher of Reformation Festival last week this prayer is a bit of a challenge. We said faith alone and this prayer says nothing about faith but enjoins us to follow saints in Godly living to the unspeakable joys of heaven. It sounds like we have just contradicted our sermon of last week. But not so fast. Augsburg Confession VI, just the second article after the article on Justification speaks of the necessity of good works. Lutherans are not faith alone and then no more, but are faith alone that leads to good works. When we forget that, we are inauthentic in our reading of our Confessions.

Theologically speaking, the best way to speak, this prayer immediately plugs us into the great mystery which is the Church. If you listen to what it says and believe it, this is a spine tingling sort of a prayer. God has knit us together into one Holy Communion. Just what could that mean? The writers of the prayers and the liturgical types who love this day, all connect the observance of the feast to the Lord's Supper. Many in fact take this day to really be a day which celebrates that line in the preface which notes that we sing with angels, archangels and with all the company of heaven, which I noted above.

The first thing to say is that this communion is an act of God. It is a miracle not of my own will or of my own imagination, but an act of God. Truly, when I eat that bread and drink that wine which is much more than what it appears to my senses to be, I am also in a place and with people who far transcend what they appear to be. My church may be humble and the folks I am communing with may be an equally humble lot of simple folk, fellow sinners in this place with me, but in faith I am dining on the very body and blood of Christ, I am in the presence of God himself and I am partaking of this feast with saints of old and today. My grandfather and yours are there. I will remember my father and mother, an aunt, and a nephew who passed away. I will know that I am once more sitting down to table with them. My mother and aunt could really set a table, so that is a pleasant idea for me.

In a few weeks after this feast, in various corners of the country, my family will undoubtedly gather to celebrate Thanksgiving, but my mom won't be there. My cousins will once more gather in their father's home, but without my aunt. My brother's family will feel acutely the absence of a toddler who died. The empty chair which those folks would have occupied will be the marker of an enormous absence, but it would be an unbearable absence were it not for the fact that on the Sunday prior, when we knelt at a rail and someone said, "Take and eat," we did indeed sit at table with them. And every Sunday now in which I grasp that chalice and taste that sacrament, it is a meal shared with those beloved and all the people whom I have loved who now rest in Christ. That is really the truth that All Saints Day celebrates. My dead in Christ are not absent, but present in Christ.

This feast cries to be preached of itself. The text is really this prayer, the assertion that God has knit us together into a great communion of all who live in Christ. This message is really important for the many lonely people in our world, especially the widows and widowers who grieve the death of a spouse. The realities of modern medicine mean that often times that widowhood is greatly extended and for some that is a terribly painful experience. While death has afflicted every generation of men, I think sometimes that our efforts to hide from death have meant that when it unavoidably confronts us, as it does in the death of a dear one, our aversion to death has served to render us less able to cope healthily with those deaths. When infant mortality and childhood diseases meant that most had lost a sibling before adult hood, perhaps we had developed skills which enabled us to grieve more healthily. Now our graves are lined with artificial grass lest we see that this body will be laid in the earth. The funeral home plays on our fears and pushes the most expensive casket, made of metal, and then encases that in a concrete bunker of a vault. But now we don't even want to confront those sterilized realities. Most people eschew a funeral for a "celebration of life" as if we can forget the fact that the person is dead.

The Christian needs none of this. We can lovingly lay the body of our loved ones into the ground and rejoice in this last moment when we carry them. We can feel their absence or their presence at every meal and sing our Te Deum and realize that we are singing with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.

FIRST READING Revelation 7:2-17

¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ²Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads." ⁴And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

⁵12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, ⁶12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, ⁷12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, ⁸12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

⁹After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and

they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?"¹⁴I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵"Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The Bible often says strange things and does so to make us think. At least that is what Augustine asserted for us many years ago. Should we thus fruitfully struggle with the image in verse 14? Washing in blood seems both illogical and offensive. Blood does not make things clean. What is more, it seems very barbarous, bloody, and carnal. This seems to be an issue with modern reading. We are not used to reading this sort of metaphor and image rich sort of literature. We like our prose to be simple and straight forward. But this passage is grabbing a rich tradition of biblical language which opens up connections to the sacrificial system of the OT, John's acclamation of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, Moses sprinkling blood on the people to cleanse them, and of course the crucifixion of Christ. It captures all of that in this little phrase, but we are often hung up on the logical non-sequitur that blood is not a good cleanser.

This picture, painted in words by John, has long engaged Christians as they have contemplated the end of the world. This picture, however, is also about the here and now, and unfortunately many have missed that point. John sees the people of God twice in this section of Revelation. This falls in the midst of one of the seven retellings of world history which make up the Apocalypse (Revelation) of John. As often happens in these tellings, between the sixth and seventh element in the history there is an interlude with two items. This is the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets. These interludes are important because they focus us upon important truth about this retelling of the story.

Critical for the reader of Revelation to remember is that the goal of the author is not to make people afraid. Quite to the contrary, the goal of Revelation is to calm people's fears. It depicts

the monstrous enemies of the people of God as terrible beasts because they are already afraid of them. It is a little like the political cartoonists of the day depicting Russia as a fierce bear. As the tensions rise the cartoonist will depict his fangs and claws to be longer and larger. John's people are enduring a terrible persecution so he depicts their persecutors as fearsome, because they are afraid of them. Then, as the story unfolds, the fearsome enemies are overcome. God intervenes and the people are saved. Revelation is not a horror story, but an anti-horror story. Unfortunately we have rather forgotten how to read it.

These interludes are presented as a means for the reader to consider the world as God sees it and to take note of important truths which are the focus of the particular retelling of the story. In this case, we have a definition of the people of God as God sees them. First we have the people described as Israel enumerated. Each tribe has 12,000 and when taken in aggregate that comes to 144,000. Now we have to talk a little about numbers in John.

The numbers in John seem to be intended as symbolic numbers. 10 seems to be a number of completeness, thus a complete complement of fingers is ten. The number 12 seems to be a number which stands for the people of God. Now, the ancient people were actually quite adept at what you would call basic math, subtraction, addition, multiplication, etc. multiplying a number like this would intensify it. Thus 10 is all of something, but 100 (10 x 10) is really all of something, and 1000 (10 x 10 x 10) is even more intensely all. 12 are the people of God, and 12 x 12 or 144 is really truth the people of God. You can see where this is going. The number 144,000 is not a literal number of people but could perhaps be rendered as 10 x 10 x 10 x 12 x 12. Or in descriptive terms, we could say: all, really all, absolutely all the really truly people of God.

Now the numbering of the people in the first part of the text also serves another function it seems. In the OT, this sort of numbering occurs several times and it had a military function. The census which Moses takes is to get people arranged for battle. Even Jesus at the feeding of the multitudes in Mark tells them to be seated in groups of fifty and hundreds, which was the military formation of ancient Israel. For an OT example of this note the scene where the captains of the fifties confront Elijah in the first chapters of II Kings. John's depiction of the people in verses 2-8 seems to be a picture of the Church militant.

That is contrasted with the next picture where the people are not numbered, but they are simply called innumerable. (This is actually handy to have at the ready if you are ever in a discussion with a Jehovah's Witness and they pull up the 144,000 issue which is so prominent in their theology.) This is not a picture of the church militant but the church at rest, the church in heaven. These people have palm fronds, not swords. They are gathered about the throne of God in a scene which deliberately remembers the scene in Rev 4-5 and will be used again in Revelation 14. Read very carefully how they are described. They have no worry or problem. They do not hunger or thirst, God takes perfect care of them and has wiped away every tear. They are now part of that great heavenly multitude who sing in praise of the Father and the Son on the throne, in the presence and power of the Spirit.

Of special import is the question of the angel which the angel answers for John. These are they who have come out of the great tribulation, they have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. Their wedding garment, to pull from a parable, is theirs by virtue of his death. They have come out of the great tribulation of this life where they wept many tears, endured hardships of every kind. In this later time which John sees, they are at perfect peace and rest. For a persecuted people this one level simply says that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. This persecution will end, either in your death or some other way, but for you will end and you will enjoy perfect rest.

But for the persecuted and the Christian of every time, it also says that those who have died, whose bodies we have laid to rest in the grave are not lost, nor forgotten by God. He wipes away their tears and our tears. They are precious to him, joining those heavenly ranks of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

Psalm 149

Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the godly!
Let Israel be glad in his Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!
Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!
For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with salvation.
Let the godly exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their beds.
Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishments on the peoples,
to bind their kings with chains
and their nobles with fetters of iron,
to execute on them the judgment written!
This is honor for all his godly ones.
Praise the LORD!

This seems like such a happy and cheerful psalm until you get to the middle of the thing. Look closely at verse six and following. The people are enjoined to have the praise of God on their lips and a two edged sword in their hands. This sounds more like something we would expect to hear being chanted today in some radical Islamist rally than in church.

What does that mean for us? Have we tamed God a little too much? The persecuted church simply does look forward to the vengeance of God on their enemies. I do not want to see the death of an enemy, but at the same time, there will be a day when Christ puts all the enemies under his feet and that will also be a sweet day. If I pull that hope out of the mix, am I somehow less able to face the cruel realities of persecution? I think so.

Many of those with whom we dine on All Saints Day are the persecuted martyrs and confessors of the Church. Can we not join them in this song? Dare we not join them in this song?

1 John 3:1-3

¹See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

In years past as we looked at this text we wondered: Is our crisis a crisis not of morality but a crisis of faith? Is the morality issue simply a symptom of the deeper hope problem that we have? What does this imagery mean for the man or woman whose father abused them? What does it mean for the person who is estranged from their family?

When Jesus welcomes us to that table on Sunday, we are welcomed to the very table of God; he is welcoming us all to his family. This is God opening the door and putting a place at his table for me.

The world is looking for that which has not yet appeared. The world sees us as hypocritical, forgetting that we make no claim to perfection. We have to believe in our own perfection, we cannot prove it. I can say that I am perfect in the present tense, because I hope in him, not because I can see it. I also am eagerly expecting that day to come when I will see what I am just as will see what he is. This is the hidden-ness of God, and the hidden-ness of people. We cannot change folks, we can only love them.

And so John makes this strange assertion: The one who hopes in him purifies himself – Hope = Faith – through faith Christ makes us pure. The word hope here is much more akin to the English “expect” or “count on.” The Greeks would thus work all week and “hope” to get paid, in English we would more likely say “expect” to get paid. This hope is the relationship of faith which hears the first part of the passage and simply says, “Daddy.”

The world does not know us. But we desperately want the world to know us. At least we seem to act that way. We get a little upset when we are ignored and when the door is shut to us because we are Christian. We are more than a little put out when that happens. Should we be?

John is not speaking here of whether our efforts through Lutheran World relief get recognized or if our signage is adequate. The world knows we are there and might either choose to ignore us or hate us. No, this knowledge is a different thing. The world doesn't understand us, it doesn't grasp who we really are. It cannot. It only judges things by what it sees with the human eyes and the reasonable senses. But when I kneel at the rail and the body of Christ comes into me, that body now becomes one with me and I with it. I am not just a graying professor with a wife and three children, I am one with God. The world sees only the guy who lives in house on Holman St. and drives a decaying Volkswagen. It does not know what I really am. When Saul of Tarsus struck the Christians of his day in persecution, he was confronted by Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus asked him, "Why do you persecute me?" Note, Christ does not ask why Saul persecutes "my people," but "me!" The blows and imprisonment with which he afflicted the church of the first century were blows and imprisonment inflicted upon the body of Christ. This is what the world does not get. Sometimes it gets a glimpse that the people of God are holy, but that is fleeting. Soon the veil is returned and we are just their neighbors, flawed and sinful just like they are.

But within this secret existence also lies a latent promise. When he returns in glory, though the rest of the world will shield its eyes from his intense glory, we will not. We will gaze upon our beloved because we will be as he is. I am not there yet, and neither are you. We are in a process of purification, a good work begun in us on the day of our baptism and which he will bring to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6

For right now, I can rejoice that I am numbered among the children of God. When I pray the Lord's Prayer and say, "Our Father..." my father hears that prayer and all my prayers, with a father's attentive ear, made attentive by his love for me, the same love he has for his only-begotten Son, Jesus. Or as John says it at the end of the passage, I am rendered pure, belonging properly to God, his child.

We thought John's text was actually saying in beautiful words exactly what we said in the Gospel lesson. See the love of God for us? We are God's children right now! We are saints right now! Yes, the world can only see that other truth of our sinfulness. But that does not mean that what we really are in Christ is not also true. We are God's children right now! He gave us his name in our baptism. He feeds us at his table. He speaks to us in His Word. We are his saintly, heaven-fit children right now.

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 5:1-12 (*Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes.*)

¹Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

²And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sometimes a story is helpful. We thought that the story Matthew tells when Jesus walks down the mountain after this sermon might help us understand this passage. Jesus first encounters a leper, the very personification of a broken humanity, a sinful humanity. He was ostracized and considered as good as dead. He was a leper. Jesus touches him and cleanses him, a sign of what he has come to do for us all. In the next verses he encounters a Roman Centurion whose servant is sick. Jesus marvels at his faith when he recognizes Jesus authority.

*Immediately after this Jesus comes to Peter's house, his mother-in-law is sick. He rebukes her fever and she gets up and **serves** them. The parallel is striking. Peter, who when Matthew wrote, was recently martyred and was considered Jesus very best friend needed Jesus. He got Jesus's help. The centurion, whom Matthew's Jewish audience would have considered as far away from God's kingdom as one could possibly be, needed and received the same Jesus, the same healing. His servant was restored, Peters serving mother-in-law was restored. I think this is an embodiment of the Beatitudes. Jesus pronounces blessings on all sorts of humanity, they all need and get the same Jesus. This has legs to preach.*

The beatitudes speak of Jesus blessing all sorts of people, some good, some bad, some hunger and thirst for a righteousness they don't have. Others are doormats, but some are peace makers and pure in heart. The history of God's church, including the folks who are resting under tombstones in our local cemeteries includes all sorts of people. Jesus has embraced them all.

Our human experience usually is that when something clean encounters a dirty thing, usually the clean thing just gets dirty. But not so in church. Jesus comes into this place, holy and pure, he does not get sullied by our sins, but our sins get wiped away by his holiness. All Saints day is a way to say that all people are embraced by this Jesus and given the same blessing, we all get to see God, inherit heaven, become pure, etc. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness is quenched

and satisfied in this Jesus. We are saints now. When we absolve people, when we put the body of Christ in their hands and mouths Jesus makes us holy, pure, and saintly.

Isn't it interesting that verses 1-10 is generic and third person, but suddenly in verse 11 he gets into the second person "you..."

Is it important to remember that we may be talking about the 144,000 – the church militant? Or should we think that these verses express the encapsulation of all mankind. These beatitudes seems to address the whole condition of humanity. Do verses 7-9 describe now the perfection of the multitude without number who gather around the throne of the Lamb?

Do we really understand the idea that we are in the church militant? I think too often we believe that we are in the church triumphant. We sit around and drink our Chardonnay or microbrew and imagine that we have arrived. But we are today in the church militant – we are battling forces of evil. Paul describes us as fighting against powers and principalities, the forces of darkness. We think that is just a bunch of primitive superstition, but is it? Or is the real battle the battle to love stinky sinners?

What is poor in spirit? What does this say about the human condition? Is it the person without the Holy Spirit? Is this an evangelism text? Or is it David who says, "Why so downcast, my soul?" Is this a word of comfort to the folks who are feeling beat up today? Do we need to say it refers to one or the other? Is Jesus being wonderfully ambiguous because he has a blessing for both of them? Do we have a poverty of spirit in that we are much more fired up about the high school's football game than anything else?

The English word "Bless" is related to the old Anglo-Saxon word for blood. Somehow blessing and blood are connected for us. It really ought not be hard for a Christian to see that. But it is. Do our hearers listen to these words of Jesus and hear a check list of things that they are supposed to be in order for God to love/bless them? Do we often slip into a real works-righteousness when these words are presented? I think so and the preacher will need to preach against that idea.

Jesus is depicting the great reversal. Even some of the things we probably count as virtues in this are often occasions for conflict and strife. Peace-making is not popular when people are angry. Just listen to the descriptions of "compromise" among the Tea-Party types. It has become another four letter word to some, and yet in other generations it has been called peacemaking. Meekness often is called spineless. We don't really want meekness; rather, we want folks to have a backbone. We encourage our daughters to be assertive, not meek. But Jesus says blessed are the meek. Is he talking about a virtue or a vice?

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit?" Is it a spiritual poverty? Is it simply my attitude? Do I feel poor in spirit, is Jesus trying to encourage me – telling me that heaven itself belongs to me? Is Jesus complimenting me or is Jesus pointing out my spiritual poverty here?

I have often preached this as a blessing for every sort and condition of men; some of these things are good, and others are not. We can even talk about whether some of them are good or bad. To hunger and thirst for righteousness sounds good, but if you think about, I hunger and thirst for things I don't have. We consider meekness a virtue, the Romans would have seen it as a character flaw. Mourning is a bad thing, but in the face of tragedy it is also the right thing. Obviously purity of heart is a good thing and so is peacemaking. But that is then juxtaposed with being persecuted which no one in their really right mind would seek.

To each of these people, whatever their condition, Jesus offers the same thing: a blessing. To be called the sons of God, to see God, to inherit heaven and earth, to be comforted and to be filled with righteousness, all are really different ways of saying much the same thing, they are just made fit to situation of the person blessed. You will fit somewhere in this list, it encompasses the whole human experience. No matter where you find yourself, God has a blessing for you.

The preacher of these beatitudes today will likely want to ask which of the conditions best describes his people. There are many ways of looking at this, perhaps most, if not all, of them are good. Of course, being Lutherans, we will probably fixate on the descriptions which will highlight our sins. There is merit to that. We do lack righteousness, we are grieving and mourning, we are helpless and weak. But I would bet that in many things your parishioners are pure in heart and that also is not always an easy thing for us to talk about. Perhaps they are indeed peace-makers and have born the scandal and the shame of that. Peacemaking is hard work and peace makers are not always liked, you see. The meek do indeed get stepped on once in a while, and while the culture will still sometimes hold up humility and meekness as a virtue, it also has little compunction about stepping on the meek.

On this All Saints Day as we remember those who have gone before us in the faith, the folks whose Christian faith has touched us and left us better off for it, God promises us that they are blessed, and we share in that exact same blessing.

There is also a strong persecution theme running through this text and really all the texts. Jesus is drying the tears of the persecuted Church in the Revelation text. The psalmist gives voice to the prayers of persecuted people that they would see the power of God exercised against their foes. In his first Epistle John notes that the world has missed the point. Now, this text ends with the idea that we will be persecuted and should not be terribly surprised at that.

It is worth noting that the original All Saints Day started out as "All Martyrs Day" and only gradually grew into the festival which honors all the departed faithful. Even within Catholicism there is still All Souls Day (Nov 2) for that feast, this day is really for those who have been enrolled in the roster of Saints. The fastest way to get yourself on that roster is to be martyred.

Law

1. Christians don't have a better life than the rest of the world. We get cancer at the same rates, our marriages fail too. We lose our jobs with everyone else and our pension funds have all taken a hit, and that means we too are afraid.
2. Christians grieve and mourn, perhaps not like others who do so without hope, but the death of a cherished loved one is still a matter of great pain for us.
3. Persecution happens, perhaps not in our personal experience, at least not the bitter dregs of persecution as some have felt it, but today as we speak, Christians in India have been hounded from their homes, threatened, beaten, and killed.
4. It is not hard for a Christian in North America to feel as though he or she is part of a slowly but surely shrinking body of faith. Our congregations get older and greyer, the money gets tighter, and the children are gone. So many of our friends have either left or died. We feel alone. If we even have a sense that we are part of the church militant, we feel like we are on the losing side.
5. There is much in this life which would argue against a posture of hopeful expectation in Christ – all of the above and more. We have no grounds for hoping in Christ – the pathetic story of some women who claim to have seen him on Easter.

Gospel

1. God wipes away the tears – the strange and sometimes perplexing answer which God has for the tears we cry is the day that he wept for his only begotten son whose death upon a cross is somehow, somehow, his healing of its brokenness. I cannot grasp all this, but I am called to believe it. Jesus died for all that is wrong in my life, every grief, every pain, every sickness, every death, even my own. He died because my morality is flawed and so is my body. God has done something about my tears and will do more when he brings this broken world to its consummation. (Rev 7 and I John 3)
2. That reality also brings comfort for this time. My sharpest pain usually involves the death of my dearest friends, my spouse, my children. God has not simply said, “some day...” he has also given us a gift for this day. Just as we gather with our living family to feast at holidays, Christ marks his resurrection, sanctifying that first day of the week, when we gather and he unites us with our family and friends in a holy meal.
3. Christ's body and blood, this fellowship established is food and company for the journey, often a difficult journey. Those who take up the cross of Christ may find that they are suffering with Jesus in some very difficult ways. Jesus sustains our faith and through that faith strengthens us for days of hardship and persecution. He is active in preserving us, through Word and Sacrament so that no enemy is too great for us, even the enemy who would take our lives. For our lives are now with him, he will not so easily relinquish them. Indeed, no one can snatch them from his hand.

4. Christ also binds us together with his people in a mighty host, a triumphant procession. The Christian is given to see the world very differently. We do not measure success as the world does, we measure it as God does. He judges men's hearts and if this church will grow it will always be because Christ has called men, quickened their hearts with his Spirit and drawn them to Himself. I am not discouraged by what I see, I am instead given to see only opportunity for God to do something great.
5. Christ fills my heart with hope. He has called me a child of God and though I have no reason to believe him, his love is not based on me, but on Christ's great act. Now, every time I walk by that cross I can hope for I am part of that great family for whom he has died.

Sermon Ideas

The preacher may want to revisit the whole idea of food. Food, remember, plays amazingly complex roles in our lives. We use food for so much more than nourishment. Families gather around food, we celebrate with food, we tell important messages with food. In some strange way food and drink is tied up with our whole sense of beauty and goodness. By using the Sacrament of the Altar, Christ is doing so much more than simply nourishing our faith, although that is a very great thing. He is binding us together into one communion, he is making our hearts merry and glad, and he is giving us a longing for the beauty of heaven itself.

1. Knit into one Holy Communion – (That the hearer, grieving in the face of this world's burdens, would be comforted by being united with all God's people in this Holy Supper.)

None of us is immune from the sting of death. Jesus has overcome it, but we wait for the promised resurrection of which his own resurrection was but a first fruit. This Thanksgiving Day we will gather with our families, eat a feast together, but in almost every home there will be an empty chair, a grandfather, a husband, a wife, a child, who is not there, who cannot be there, they are dead and we feel their absence acutely. Jesus is aware of your tears, he knows that you grieve the loss of the names we read today. Your loved ones are not as distant as you might think. He who has crossed over the great chasm of life to death and back again, bridges it right here for us. Just as we celebrate Thanksgiving Day with a feast with our loved ones, today and every day we kneel at this rail with our hand extended he bids us dine with the company of heaven, including the loved ones you have buried and who await the resurrection in his hands. I cannot explain it, but I can believe it. When I eat this bread and drink this wine, I am with him and with them. It is not the last day, nor the fullness of the resurrection, but it is a comfort for right now. I feast with angels, archangels, and with all the company of heaven.

I have heard one preacher who had an altar rail built into a semi-circle talk about how the circle of the rail is completed on the 'other side' of that altar, in heaven itself. Looking

through the sacraments, we see not the back wall of the Church, but we have a glimpse into heaven itself, with the eyes of faith.

2. Numbered with the Saints – (that the hearer would take courage from the fact that they have been united with the mighty hosts of God and in that courage would boldly engage in the ministry of God’s kingdom in this place.)

Preaching Revelation 7, especially the first part God does not see things quite the same way as we do. I recently spoke with an old friend who is a stock broker and I commented on the way things are going for that business. She laughed and said, “Come on, we’re having a great sale right now!” We could probably have ample reasons to be discouraged by what we see going on around us. Congregations and schools are under real stress too. Christianity in North America seems to be on the ropes, following a dismal European path of irrelevance and empty buildings. But God does not count success the same way we do. In truth, he who goes looking for that one lost sheep and leaves the 99 behind is a strange business man all the way around. He has today knit us into a mighty host of Christians, a body which stretches around the world and across two millennia of history, and even beyond into those heroes of the Old Testament as well. Take courage from the fact that the God who went with David against Goliath goes with you out those doors. Take courage that the God who turned Saul to Paul still works in this world. Take courage that the Lord who saw Christianity through its nadir of the 700’s would move it to explode in evangelistic growth in the 800’s. Remember, he sometimes takes centuries to get the job done, but he loves all the people of this world and there simply is no problem bigger than him. The meal of which you partake today is nothing less than your connection to God and his people of every time and place. As surely as you chew and swallow you are one of them, one of us. Not an army of one, but a mighty host, arrayed for a battle whose outcome is already known. We have the victory.

When we hand out the body of Christ in the Sacrament could we almost say, “take courage, this is the body of Christ.” That body has united us with mighty archangels and fierce warriors of God’s heavenly army. We are not alone, we are united with them. It has made us one with saints and of course with Jesus himself. We are not alone, no matter how isolated the world would like us to feel.

3. Children of God (Epistle – That the hearer would delight in God’s statement that they are God’s children right now and they have the promise that they will be as Jesus is. This will result in a life lived in joyful confidence which is empowered to much good.)

All Saints day makes a really interesting claim about us. We are sinners, yes, we get that a lot. But we are also saints. This day is the catch-all day when we get to celebrate every saint, not only the famous ones, but also the little guys, the unknown and humble servants of God who may not have done something really spectacular, but who did really. They believed. The world has not valued perhaps what they have done, but God has moved in

them and he has called them to beautiful faith, and in Jesus they are holy and pure. They are saints. We are numbered in that group, we are saints.

John uses the picture of people who are the children of God – that’s another way to call us saints, but it also says something beautiful about us. Through creation, God really is our source, hence we could say that he can claim our paternity. But in Jesus he has gone a step further. He has claimed us, put his name on us. He has entered into a relationship which goes beyond a fact of nature, it is a relationship of love and care which we are right to call Fatherhood.

- A. Children are always children of their parents, even when they are naughty and even when they have grown up and moved out of the house. The parent still loves them. Parental love really cannot be earned. It is simply given, mysteriously and beautifully. We may fail as parents, it is true. There are some whose love may have grown cold. God loves us better than the best parent.
- B. Children are heirs. The law says it, but even more so, God’s love says it. Jesus today speaks of us as heirs of heaven and earth. He can call us that because our father is the Lord of heaven and earth. We are God’s heirs. We do not enter heaven through some servant’s entrance, in the back, sneaking in, but God rolls out the red carpet, tells the angels to grab some trumpets, and lets the celestial kingdom know that one of his children has entered to claim his/her inheritance.
- C. Heirs have privileges. They carry around the name of their father and that opens doors for them. As the child of some earthly powerful person, our words have authority and power, even it is really our father’s power and authority. Likewise with us. Our Father’s claim upon us extends to the words we speak. We may forgive with this authority. We may love with his love.
- D. God’s children have confidence that an employee or servant simply do not have. Jesus promised presence and his beautiful promise to us means that we can sin boldly, make a mistake, try something, and if it turns out that our limited human reason and vision means that we have sinned or made a mistake or it has all gone south, Jesus love is always bigger than our mistakes. We are not paralyzed by the fear of failure into inaction. We do something, even if it is wrong, we are confident that Christ can make something of it.
- E. Being a child also means that we are part of a very large family. That means we care for all sorts of folks whom we might not otherwise get to know and love. Jesus connects us to a very large family of folks. We can make quilts for refugees in another land, or we can stop by and have a cup of coffee with that lonely widow down the street. Being God’s child fills our world with people we can love and find joy in and with.

- F. Being a child of God means we get to be like Jesus. He is on the other side of his encounter with a very big monster that would frighten us into panic: death. Jesus, God's Son, whose son-ship has been given to us, has broken death's power. As John says, one day we will be like him. We cannot see it now and the world doesn't recognize it, but one day we too conquer that miserable foe.

One could go on and perhaps the preacher will find another thing to say, but make sure you get that last one in there. The people of God on this day will then gather in prayer, thanking God for the saints who have gone before but thanking God as well that each one of us in the room is also numbered in the saints.

After the prayer we will all sit down/kneel down to dinner together, for those of us on this side of death's veil it is a foretaste of heaven's sumptuous feast, for them in its fullness. But it is the same feast really. We shall enjoy our feast and we shall rejoice that we are all God's children, part of one very large family, united in Christ, God's Son. See what a blessing God has showered down upon us. He has called us his children. And that is what we are.

I think the preacher could step out of the pulpit and simply ask which of the children of God are you eating with today? Which saint, which person on the other side of this wall behind the altar, who kneels at the table on the other side, are you glad to be eating with today? Have a clipboard, write the names, and go right into the All Saints Day prayer.

4. Those who hope in him purify themselves as he is pure (That the hearer would see themselves in the way that God sees them – resulting in a holy and infectious joy at being the Child of God with Jesus.)

All Saints Day reminds us that we are Saints. We are too often told that we are sinners, we have that confession part down really well, the "I am a worm" but there is another side to the confession – there is absolution too. God declares us righteous in the blood of Jesus, he declares us to be his children. Yes, I know that I am hopeless, but that is an evaluation made "pre-Christ." The post baptismal man is filled with hope – there is no enemy bigger than my savior's love and there is no problem which I cannot face with the help of my beloved Jesus. I can really lay claim to that "Blessed" which Jesus speaks. It is rightfully mine because he has given it to me. The English word "bless" comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word for "blood." I am blessed today, in the blood that flows through my veins because of the meal of which I partake.

That blessing of Jesus is for every part of my life, the good parts and the not so good parts. It is for the moments of persecution and the victories. Look at the second part of the Revelation text today and get a marvelous picture of what it means to be blessed. All sorts of good things happen to them, nothing ill. Best of all, Jesus himself wipes away every tear.

Outline:

- A. We have the Confession piece down pat – it is honest, it is true, but it not the whole story.
 - B. Jesus calls us Saints today
 - a. Listen to John in the Epistle Lesson – we are God’s children right now
 - b. Listen to John describe us in the Revelation text: the holy ones of God, whom he shepherds and loves and whose tears he carefully dries.
 - c. Listen to Jesus himself describe us in our all-too-human conditions today: We are all “blessed.”
 - C. All these texts ask us to believe this to be true, they don’t ask us to “see” it with these human eyes. The world does not know us, because it did not know Jesus. Jesus acknowledges the poverty of spirit, the suffering, and the mixed condition of his audience. Revelation posits a church which is marshaled for battle and the same innumerable church which is at rest. We are still part of the Church Militant – not yet the Church at rest, but we are also, in faith, at one with the church at rest. (We will need to use that word “militant” with some care. It is often heard as a very negative idea by people. Should we talk instead about a church which is engaged with the world verses a church in “retirement.” Should we rather use the idea of a church which is still at work? Rather than weapons, should we be talking about the beautiful tools of love which God has given us to wield and use in this world? Does the Christian really have a social security benefit to beat all pensions?)
 - D. John also asks us to “expect” or the more traditional word is “hope” in God. The one who has this hope is purified through that hope. Such hope is an occasion for God to work great change and blessing in our lives. Jesus does not leave us poor in spirit, downtrodden and hungering for righteousness. The Blessing of Jesus is a blessing which satisfies such hunger, which calls us rich in Christ and lets that begin to be seen in our lives. The persecuted also know a strange joy. They are numbered with the prophets of old. The Church militant which straps on the armor and grabs the sword to do battle in this world has an eye toward that great multitude at rest. It hurts and yet we know where we are headed, where Christ dries every tear.
4. Blessed are the.... (That the hearer would be blessed today – Jesus speaks of the whole range of humanity, the good, the bad, the ugly, and he has the same word for them all – Blessed)

This sermon preaches the Beatitudes as Jesus word for the whole human race, the folks today, the folks of yesterday, and all the folks who ever lived. See the story we included under the Gospel lesson today. Would that make this sermon much better? They are all blessed. The kingdom of heaven is given to the poor in spirit – is that a spiritual poverty or is that a virtuous attitude, Jesus says blessed to both of them.

Jesus speaks the great reversal today. He wants us to imagine it. We need imagination to hear these words. The world wants to hammer into us that we are what we see, we are simply what we are. But Jesus speaks blessing to us and speaking that blessing gives us occasion to imagine something else. The meek doormat is the one who possesses the whole earth. The person who is feeling downtrodden is given the kingdom. The person who is pure in heart, but perhaps notices that he or she is not pure in life, they too have a gift from God. The person who is starving for righteousness, either desiring righteousness, or looking at themselves and noticing a profound lack of that righteousness, they too are blessed.

The blessing is now, it is not a future tense blessing, but is a blessing right now. We are hopeful/expectant with a current reality. Bless is related to the word blood. We are all blessed, we are all bloody, robes washed white in the blood of Christ. Isn't it interesting that blood, something that we are stained with normally, becomes the very instrument of our cleansing. Blood not what we use to make things white. The blood of Jesus cleanses.

This might be a great sermon to simply end by reading these words. Prepare them to hear them, rather than reflect on them. The preacher might well want to use the words of John in the second lesson, and the description of the blessed at rest in the first lesson.

5. I believe in...the communion of saints (Preaching the festival – that the many who come to this place mourning the spaces made empty by death would know the joy of their loved one's presence in the sacrament.)

This sermon is really a corporate funeral sermon. We have lots of people who are grieving and this day may simply be a chance for those folks to bring their grief to this place and to express it and have Jesus take it and bless them.

This sermon would stare death in the face and assert that death does not have the last word. Life in Christ has the last word. You might just want to rent and watch Gran Torino with Clint Eastwood. The main character is not able to face death until he comes to grips with his grief for his wife who has died. The end of the story with the sermon by the young Catholic priest who says that Walter taught him how to live is a really powerful scene. Much of the movie is very coarse with some foul language, but that could be shown. Walter was united with his faithful, church going wife.