

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

Every year on the Church calendar we get Reformation Sunday and All Saints Sunday back to back. I don't think I've ever notice before that there is a little bit of tension between the emphases of these two Sundays, and I think that tension is characteristic of our entire lives as baptized people of God. On Reformation Sunday we remind ourselves of the foundational Lutheran teaching of justification by faith. The emphasis of Reformation Sunday is on what God has done for us, rather than what we do for God. But then comes All Saints Sunday the very next week, when we celebrate those who put their faith in God, who lived out their faith in their daily lives, and who in some cases put their life on the line in witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see the tension? If you lean too far in the Reformation Sunday direction, you might get the impression that God has taken care of everything for us and nothing we do matters. If you lean too far in the All Saints Sunday direction, you might be tempted to think that God has gotten us off to a good start in our lives of faith, but now it's really up to us what we're going to do with the gift of salvation that God has given us. I hope to make the case in the next few minutes that we need both emphases for a health life of faith. I hope to convince you that it is absolutely only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are saved from the power of sin, death and evil and also that how we live our lives absolutely matters to God and God's ongoing project of liberating and renewing the world.

To do that, I'm going to focus on three things about the saints. First, that it is what God has done for the saints that makes them the saints. Second, our celebration of the saints is intimately bound to the promise that death cannot hold them. And Third, the lives of the saints, and not just their deaths and the hope eternal life, matter. Both their witness to the gospel and their concrete acts of love on behalf of others made a difference in the world and advanced God's project.

Before I get to those three things, I want to first quickly say something about what we mean by saints. English is a funny language. We have way more words than we need. In Greek, the word saint is the noun to the adjective "holy." So saints are "holy ones." And "holy" means special, set apart by God. In the New Testament, "saints" was a word for a member of the community of believers in Jesus. Believers were understood to have been called and set apart by God. Notice the emphasis. God is the one making them holy, or special. As the church grew in the next centuries, the emphasis shifted away from the ordinary believers to especially heroic people like the martyrs, those who died for the faith, who refused to recant in times of persecution. That emphasis continued in the middle ages. The saints were those who had lived exemplary lives, whose balance of good deeds in their lives far surpassed their sins. And their extra goodness, or merits, were thought to be transferable to others. And that's the connection to the indulgences that Luther wrote against. The church claimed to be able to distribute the positive balance of the saints' merits to get souls out of the debtors' prison of Purgatory. The emphasis now was fully on what the saints had done for God, rather than the other way around.

In challenging the church's practice of selling indulgences, Luther also criticized the theology behind it. (And now were already in my first point). He wrote that the saints didn't become saints by first doing virtuous things and then getting noticed by God, like some sort of celestial talent search. The saints were the saints because of what God had first done for them. His two main examples were Peter and Mary. Peter had some pretty blatant missteps in his

career as a disciple. First he tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to be crucified (for which Jesus called him Satan!), and second he betrayed Jesus on the night of his arrest. How Peter became a saint, Luther argued, was by Jesus forgiving him, and then calling him to go and make disciples. In Mary's case, Jesus used her own words in her famous song sung at her visitation with her cousin Elizabeth. In that song she sang about God casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly, and she referred to herself as one of the lowly ones God had lifted up. Once again, not what she had done for God, but what God had done for her. Mary's willingness to participate in God's plan and her faithfulness as the mother of Jesus were responses to what God had first done for her, Luther argued. So that's the first point. The saints are the saints because of what God has done for them.

Second, we celebrate the saints because we trust that in death they now are recipients of the promise of new and everlasting life. An our texts today hit this point particularly hard. First, Isaiah's vision of the mountaintop feast, where God will "swallow up death forever." Second, the vision of the new heaven and the new earth coming together at the end of all things, when death will be no more. And finally the raising of Lazarus from the dead as a sign that Jesus has power even over death. This is what we usually have our minds focused on on All Saints Sunday – at least I know that's true for me. This is the Sunday when we remember all of the faithful departed who were near and dear to us. This is the Sunday when we read off the names of the baptized who have died in the past year who we were particularly close to. It's a day for remembering all who have gone before us in the faith and looking in hope to the resurrection and new life God has promised both them and us.

Third, we acknowledge the life, work, and witness of the saints during their lifetimes, and we look to them as examples of faithful lives lived in the service of God and of their neighbor. This is where the tension lies. We do not celebrate the saints or follow their example because they earned their own salvation. Because they didn't. What we celebrate is that God's saving work on their behalf bore fruit in lives that were dedicated to loving God and serving others. They did not simply receive God's salvation and live happily ever after until they died and went to heaven, as though this life and what we do with it doesn't really matter. It is because they valued this life that they dedicated it to resisting evil and caring for others, using their lives to be God's instruments of love, reconciliation, and peace. That is the example we hold up for ourselves. And recent events have shown that there is plenty of evil in the world to be resisted, plenty of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexist bigotry, resentment, and violence to stand in solidarity against. And one of the easy ways that you can take a stand is by exercising your right and your responsibility to vote in this week's election, if you haven't already voted early. Vote not in your personal interests, though, but in the interests of the common good, with a special eye to the most vulnerable among us. Politics will not solve all of our problems, but influencing how we govern ourselves is an important part of the bigger picture.

God has called and made us saints and God's partners in the project of making all things new. God has conquered the power of sin, death, and evil by the cross and the empty tomb, and God is showering us even now with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to live lives of faithful integrity in the world God so loves. As we celebrate the lives of the departed saints, may we also rejoice in our calling as saints of God and trust in God's promises. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.