

People Of The Blessing ... Matthew 5: 1-12
All Saints' Sunday, November 2, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA + Pastor Roy Almquist

In spite of its splendid name, the *Festival of All Saints' Day* has become a distant, forgotten Church observance. It has not always been that way. Once All Saints' Day was a major event on the calendar of Christian Europe. Because he knew the churches would be packed with worshipers on All Saints' Day, Martin Luther chose the eve of that festival as the occasion for posting his arguments against the sale of indulgences, the *95 Theses*, on the Wittenberg University chapel door. All Saints' Day continues to be observed as a national holiday in most European countries.

In the United States, we do not observe All Saints' Day, unless it falls on a Sunday. The eve of All Saints' Day has been pre-empted into the children's favorite .. Halloween. But as a final concession to tradition, most Lutheran congregations do observe this Sunday .. the first Sunday in November .. as All Saints' Sunday, using it as an occasion for remembering those who have died during the past year. So today we join with Christians near and far to give thanks for those who have served within the Church Militant here on earth and who now are part of the Church Triumphant in heaven.

Before I came to Calvary in 1984, I was the Pastor of historic Zion Lutheran Church in Saddle River, New Jersey, founded in 1821. In a way, every Sunday was *All Saints' Sunday* at Zion because a cemetery surrounded the church building, making it impossible to ignore the *saints*. Whether walking from the parsonage to one of our three church buildings or crossing from the church sanctuary on the street to the Fellowship Hall in back of the property, I regularly walked through the cemetery, reminding me of those saints who had built the church over the course of 150 years. Thus I grew accustomed to remembering that the saints were watching us and cheering us on, as we lived through our joys and sorrows, as the people of God in Saddle River, New Jersey.

At a time when we are preparing to call a new Senior Pastor, I hope that the members of Calvary Lutheran Church are mindful of our place in the ongoing chain of witnesses that forms this congregation. We are part of something that began over eighty years ago. Our duty is to be faithful and engaged in valid ministry. This is our moment, but we are building on the sacrifice and commitment of all those who have gone before us. As we minister to those who need our care, reach out to new residents and university students, strive to keep our young people connected with the church, and foster a safe, caring environment for all children, let us never forget that we are standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning contains some intriguing words from the Sermon on the Mount: ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*** [Matthew 5: 4]. All Saints' Sunday is a time when we actually do something that is extremely counter-cultural - we remember those who mourn and we acknowledge that they are sad because someone they love has died. I call this counter-cultural because, for the most part, we are a death-denying society. We go to great lengths to avoid having to visit a graveyard or look at a corpse. We keep the dead at a significant distance from our lives. The government allows no pictures of caskets returning from Iraq or Afghanistan.

I don't know if you have ever thought about it, but, since World War One, new churches are rarely designed with a churchyard for burials. Cemeteries are now located outside of town. Indeed, the trend is toward *memorial parks*, where graves have no headstones to besmirch the horizon and the park itself looks more like a nature preserve or golf course, than a burial ground.

Perhaps some of you saw the article on the op-ed page of yesterday's *New York Times*, which asked: ***Why are we afraid of All Saints' Day?*** [New York Times, 11/01/08, p. A23] The article by a funeral director named Thomas Lynch cited a university professor, June Hobbs, who teaches a course on **Death in American Culture**. Dr. Hobbs [of Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, NC,] takes her students on a field trip to a Civil War graveyard. Most of them have never been to a cemetery. She helps them to understand the impact of death at the time of the Civil War, how it affected all families and captivated the conversation of entire communities.

In America today we do all we can to avoid death. Funerals become less common and, when there is a *time of remembrance*, it is often in a sterile environment with no body present and conversation that encourages a good laugh, rather than a good cry. American society treats grief as if it were a psychological disorder.

Not so the Church. ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*** This wonderful Beatitude challenges us to stand up in the midst of a death-denying society and say it is reasonable to mourn and it is equally appropriate to give thanks for the lives of those who have blessed us, encouraged us, and now are no longer with us. One of the things the Church invites us to do on All Saints' Sunday is to mourn. As we read the names of those, who have died, we acknowledge that we are diminished because they are not with us. But we also celebrate that we are greater because they have been.

Yesterday morning and well into the afternoon, Pastor Gwen, Jim and Janet Murphy, and I participated in a Service of Thanksgiving for the life of Joel Davenport. Joel was the beloved husband and ministry partner of Pastor Pat Davenport, our Synod's Mission Director. Pat is a dear friend and co-worker during the years I served as Bishop of this

Synod. The service for Joel represented the very best of the African-American religious tradition that continues to enrich the Lutheran Church.

Joel Davenport was an exemplary human being. He died prematurely about a week ago at the age of 54. In the past 6-8 years, Joel and Pat developed Spirit and Truth Worship Center, Yeaden, from a handful of people to a congregation of well over 200 members. One by one members of his family, his faith community, his neighbors, and his co-workers gave witness to the qualities present in Joel's life and how he was a great blessing to so many. Hymns were sung, prayers were offered, precious stories were shared, and God's promises were proclaimed. If the family did not have to get to the cemetery by 2:00, I think the service could have lasted five hours! And everyone who attended that service was blessed and strengthened.

**What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms,
Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.** [Eliza A. Hoffman, ELW 774]

On this All Saints' Sunday we boldly proclaim that we need not fear nor deny death. Physical death is a part of the natural order of things. The mortality of the human race is 100% and there will be no purple pill to solve this problem. But that's all right. We have our Lord's promise that the relationship we have with God in this life will be continued. Therefore, we will be united with those whom we have known and loved in this life. We cannot prove it .. we do not need to.

On All Saints' Sunday we remind each other that we place our faith in that great cloud of witnesses we call the *communion of saints*, or more properly the *community of saints*. In faith we know that we are never alone, and though our relationship with those whom we have known and loved is changed, we are not separated. We have the best of their example, the seeds of their inspiration, and the challenge to greatness that was their greatest gift to us.

Every one of us, gathered this morning, holds someone precious in our hearts, someone who has gone ahead of us. We miss them and mourn them, but we also cherish their memories and gain strength from all that we recall. If we weep, we do not weep like those who have no hope. The promise we have received is that we do not have to remain in pain. God has turned his face toward us and in the radiance of his presence, we have hope, and help, and life renewed. ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*** AMEN.