

**Sermon**  
**All Saints Sunday**  
**Nov 1, 2009**

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, a day when we remember all of the saints. It's an ancient custom, dating back well into the Middle Ages. But in the Lutheran Church, we celebrate it differently than in the Roman Catholic Church. Because Roman Catholics make a distinction between the saints, the exceptional Christians who were particularly close to God and are commemorated on Nov. 1, and what we might call the "ordinary" believers who have passed away, those who are not exceptional and haven't attained the status of sainthood. Their day is Nov. 2, tomorrow, All Souls day. We also are different from Roman Catholics in that they pray to the saints and ask them to intercede to God for the living, while we do not.

Why the differences? The reason is that in our tradition, we do not regard some believers as better or holier or closer to God than others, in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition. In fact, in the Lutheran tradition, we hold to the idea taught by Martin Luther that says that *all* of us are at the same time saints and sinners. That means everybody is the same. We are all equally saints, and we are all equally sinners. No one is above the rest and no one is below the rest. No one is closer to God, and no one is further away from God. That goes back to Luther's teaching about justification through faith. What makes us saints or holy people is not the amount of good works we have done, or the fact that we have lived holy lives free from sin. In fact, we have not, because we are all sinners and in this life always will be. What makes us saints is one thing alone: God's grace that accepts us in Christ in spite of our sin.

When we speak of the saints, we also are referring not only to those who have passed away, but the living as well. Paul begins just about all of his epistles, or letters, addressing his readers as "saints": he writes to the saints in Rome, to the saints in Corinth, to the saints in Ephesus and Philippi and Colossae. In other words, for Paul, all believers were saints. You and I are saints, together with all those who have died in the faith.

Personally, however, that language of being "saints" and "holy persons" has always made me feel a little uncomfortable. To be honest, I don't really like being called a saint. When people think about saints or being holy, they have this image of someone who has an aura around their head, who kind of floats on air and lives detached from the world in a kind of heavenly, blissful existence, never doing anything wrong and being totally dedicated to contemplating God. To be holy is often understood in terms of being virtually sinless, always having pure thoughts and being kind and nice and sweet to everyone. I don't think that describes any of us here, and I doubt that any of us here would like to be described in those terms, put on a pedestal as the perfect saints to be admired and venerated, the paragon of virtue. All of us know that we are far from perfect and are often anything but holy, both in our thoughts and our actions. We are sinners, people who think and do lots of things that we shouldn't. And so were the people who came before us. It's easy to idealize those who have passed away, as if they had no faults and did only good things, but deep down, we know that that's not true. Those who have gone before us were not only saints but sinners like the rest of us.

That makes me wonder whether we as Lutherans, instead of calling this day "All Saints Day," we should call it "All Saints and Sinners Day." Because as we look at ourselves, and recall our loved ones and others who have departed and who we trust are with God, that is what we see: saints and sinners. People who have done good things and bad, right and wrong. People who have served and helped others at times while at other times hurting others, whether intentionally or not, and messing things up terribly. Yet people who like you and I are by God's grace

forgiven and accepted in Christ. Precisely because of that, we are all special. When we say that in our church, we don't believe that some believers are superior to others or stand above the rest as being more holy and godly, and therefore closer to God, that might be interpreted to mean that we are all ordinary. But that would be incorrect. In reality, all of us are not *ordinary* but *special* in God's sight—not because of the good things in us, but simply because in Christ God loves us and accepts us just as we are, with all of our flaws and imperfections, our mistakes and blunders. The good things and the bad things that are in all of us make each one of us unique.

And so on this day, what we really celebrate is that we accept ourselves as God accepts us, as a communion of people who are all very different and unique and who therefore complement one another, a mix of sinners and saints who together make up the one body of Christ. What makes us special is not who we are or what we have done, but that God loves us just as we are, and that we love and accept one another just as we are, imperfect people struggling in life to live as God's children the best we can, knowing we will never live up to the ideal.

So today let us celebrate. Celebrate those of us who are alive and those who have departed from among us as a communion of saints—and sinners. What makes us a communion is not what we have done, but that together we are loved by God and by one another just as we are. That's the kind of communion I want to be a part of—not a select group of perfect saints who sit around reflecting on how good they have been and contemplating God in a state of disembodied bliss. If that's heaven, I'm not sure I want to go there. Because the people I want to spend eternity with are those who are just like me, a mix of good and bad, virtue and vice, people who are special precisely because they are ordinary like me. To be a part of that type of communion with others feel great and is something to celebrate. It feels heavenly.

And that's what we rejoice in on this All Saints Day: that some day all of us will be reunited with one another and with those who have gone before us in heaven in a communion of saints and sinners, where we can just sit around rejoicing at what we got right, crying together over the ways we hurt one another, and laughing together over the stupid things we did and the blunders we made, just being ourselves and accepting one another as God has accepted us.

That will truly be heaven. Amen.