

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle  
Feast of All Saints  
6 November 2011  
Grace Lutheran Church, Wichita, KS  
Revelation 7:9-17

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

Things are not always the way they seem.

Just look around and see who's come here today.

Look at yourself, the person sitting next to you, and the distracted children across the pew.  
Are these really the saints?

Our Lutheran Confessions define the Church this way:

*"The Church is the congregation of saints  
in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered."*<sup>1</sup>

And it's true, the Gospel is preached here and the Sacraments are delivered and received—  
but where are the saints?

This is the difficulty we have with the Church.

The Church often seems a whole lot less spectacular than it should.

The people in the pews don't look any different than those still in bed at home.

The music and singing aren't quite what we picture the heavenly chorus to sound like,  
we stumble over our readings,  
we miss a word here and there,  
and sometimes things seem to drag.

And more than that, as we look at our own lives,

the way we live day to day,

the way we treat our family:

our brothers and sisters, our parents, our kids, our grandparents, and so forth,

the way we act when no one is looking,

the things we hide,

the way we put on a good front when company is over,

pretending that all is well and family life is easy—

when all that goes on,

how can we call ourselves the saints?

You could simply look at what Jesus says in the Gospel reading for today:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,*

*Blessed are those who mourn,*

*Blessed are the meek,*

*and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart,*

*the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness' sake,*

*[and] Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil  
against you falsely on my account"* (Mt 5:3-11).

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<sup>1</sup> AC VII, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 60.

How often do you show mercy?  
 Is your heart pure?  
 Do you make peace—or do you say exactly what you know will make your spouse even madder?  
 Are you persecuted for doing what is right, for confessing Christ, for standing up for the faith?  
 Or are you persecuted for cheating others,  
 for lying, gossiping, and for all sorts of poor decisions?

When we look at ourselves honestly,  
 the way we know ourselves to be when others aren't watching,  
 we know there's nothing "saintly" about us—nothing "Blessed" at all!

We've heard the hatred come out of our mouths,  
 we've lost our temper with our children,  
 we've all thought of a hundred places we'd rather be right now than here.

And when you look around at those gathered here today,  
 you're looking at a bunch of broken families and broken souls,  
 all having put on enough of a show to look put together.

These are the saints.  
 Things aren't always the way they seem.

The very last book in the Bible, Revelation, where our first reading today is from,  
 is a vision of heaven, a vision of the saints, a vision of *you*.

Around the year 95A.D. St. John was exiled by the Emperor Domitian to the Greek island of Patmos.

It was here that St. John saw the vision of heaven.

And this vision of heaven, especially the reading from today,  
 tells of a reality that seems impossible or far-fetched.

St. John says,

*"After 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 hand,  
 crying out with a loud voice,  
 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'  
 And all the angels...fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying,  
 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power  
 and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!'"* (Rev 7:9-12)

And as St. John is watching all this go on, enthralled by the beauty and splendor of heaven,  
 one of the elders came and invited him deeper into the mystery of what he saw:  
*“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” (7:13)*

St. John doesn't have a clue, and he doesn't pretend to,  
*“Sir, you know,”* he says.

And the elder jumps at the opportunity to preach to John the good news of salvation!  
 He tells him who these saints are, how they got here, and what they do:  
*“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.  
 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.  
 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;  
 the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.  
 For 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” (Rev 7:14-17).*

The saints are those washed in the blood of the Lamb.  
 The saints are those who's filthy rags and deeds and lives have been made pure, white, clean.  
 The saints are those who's sins are forgiven.

Now, there are two kinds of saints.

There are the saints we remember today who have gone on before us,  
 who now rest from their labors,  
 who have come out of this great tribulation,  
 who's tears are wiped from their eyes, who no longer suffer or lack any good thing,  
 these are the saints who gather around the throne day and night,  
 our loved ones who have died in the faith before us.

There are also the saints who still struggle, and work, and labor, and fail, and suffer, and die.  
 These are the saints who gather today in these pews,  
 who lose loved ones to cancer and car wrecks,  
 who's children leave them and betray them and cause all sorts of heart-aches,  
 who struggle to pay their bills,  
 who hate the way they put on a good act, but secretly are suffering and dying within,  
 these are the saints we see and talk with and pray for day and night,  
 you, the baptized, the forgiven, you are these saints!

Now, even though there are two kinds of saints—  
 those who rest and those still on their pilgrimage along the way—  
 there is only one Church.

That's how we confess it in the creed,  
*"I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church."*

And remember,  
*"The Church is the congregation of saints  
 in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered"*

So what that means is that if you want to gather with your loved ones,  
 who have already died and now rest from their labors and struggles,  
 then come to where Christ is.

Come to the place and point of forgiveness.  
 Come to the gathering of saints,  
 the communion of the holy ones around the holy things,  
 Come to the altar where the sacrament of sins forgiven is put into your mouth,  
 where you join at the same feast as all the forgiven who have gone before us!

For it is here in this Church that your sins are forgiven,  
 where the Gospel sets you free from the guilt that weighs you down,  
 where the body and blood of Jesus strengthen and preserve you both now,  
 and also unto life everlasting,  
 where you are called "Blessed" by God, and saints.

It's here that we gather around the throne and before the Lamb,  
 singing the heavenly chorus that *"Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb."*

And while it might not always appear to be so glorious, so heavenly, so divine—  
 things aren't always as they appear.

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*