

## **Sermon, November 1, 2020**

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome Alice Fleischman and Mike Broderick from the musical group Aurora Celtic, who are providing Special Music for our worship. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are again rising. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshipping together even though safely apart. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com) (no spaces or caps)

Our annual congregational meeting will be held in two weeks, on Sunday November 15<sup>th</sup> at noon. Approving the 2021 budget is the only agenda item. It is a virtual meeting and you have been sent a zoom invitation. Please download the Zoom software ahead of time, if you haven't already. For those without Internet service, you have been mailed a copy of the budget and you can vote for or against it by sending a postcard or calling the church office. Also call the office if you have questions.

Now today's stupid joke.

Since today is All Saint's Sunday, I thought we should talk about some saints, past and present. One of the most recently canonized Popes, Saint Pope John the twenty-third is one of my favorites. He was a personal hero of mine as a champion of civil rights, social justice and ecumenism, and he also had a great sense of humor. Shortly after he assumed the Papacy in 1958, Pope John was asked, "How many people work in the Vatican?" And he replied, "About half of them."

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, whose people are knit together in one holy Church, the body of Christ our Lord: Grant us grace to follow your blessed saints in lives of faith and commitment, and to know the inexpressible joys you have prepared for those who love you; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.**

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**A reading from the Book of Revelation, the seventh chapter.**

I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are

these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows."

Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

**Here ends the reading.**

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**The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the fifth chapter.**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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

## **The Gospel of the Lord.**

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**Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

All Saints Day has had a place in the church calendar since the fourth century, making it as old as the observation of Christmas. In the Catholic Church All Saints Day is November first, followed by All Souls Day on the second. Most Protestants observe them together on the first Sunday of November.

Probably because it's hard enough to get Protestants to church on a Sunday, let alone any other day of the week.

All Saints serves as a kind of catchall for those saints who didn't get their own individual festival or feast day, as well as those whose date of death is unknown. You see, saints are commemorated on the day they died, not the day they were born. All Souls Day honors and commemorates the non-canonized saints who have passed in the last year. They include folks like our neighbors, our friends and family members. We've lost three congregation members in the last year that I was quite fond of. Sam Butt, Mildred Dunbar and just last week George Scheffel. Many friends of our congregation and friends our members have also moved on, and will be missed.

The word Saint comes from the Latin word sanctus derived from Sancus--the name of the Roman god of trust and fidelity. In the Bible the saints are Tzadikim, meaning "righteous ones" in Old Testament Hebrew. They are hagiois, meaning "holy ones" in New Testament Greek.

The Catholic Church defines saints as deceased holy persons whose souls are likely already in heaven. They are considered to be so full of grace that when they died they didn't need purification in what Catholics

call purgatory. At first sainthood was reserved for Biblical figures and martyrs.

In fact All Saints Day began as The Feast of the Martyrs, commemorating the many Christians who have died for their faith. Sainthood was later expanded to include those who had clearly LIVED out their faith in an exemplary manner, regardless of whether or not they died defending it.

Unfortunately, there was no formal qualifying system for sainthood until quite recently, so at times sainthood was arguably a little too easy to come by. For the most part, if your local Bishop declared you a saint, then you were. Problem was, many declared saints turned out not to be all that saintly.

Cyril of Alexandria comes to mind. Serving as Patriarch of the ancient city, historians say he was essentially a street thug, responsible for the deaths of many he considered to be heretics, including most Jews, Pagans and even any Christians who dared to cross him. They say Cyril lynched Hypatia, who was a popular and accomplished mathematician, astronomer, inventor and well-respected educator in the early fifth century. Apparently SHE (Yes, she was a she) happened to enjoy the regular dance exhibitions performed by a talented troupe of Jews in the bustling city. Cyril on the other hand, not so much.

Some saints were canonized based solely on legend and folklore, and may not have even been real people. The most famous likely non-person-saint is Christopher. St. George is apparently also iffy, as is St. Nicholas, (but don't tell the kids.)

I told you a few years ago about one of the more interesting saintly characters in history-- St. Guinefort. His story still makes me laugh. Guinefort lived back in 13<sup>th</sup> century France. He was locally declared a saint after several healing miracles were attributed to him by folks who prayed at his gravesite, outside the castle in Lyon.

In life, Guinefort was a faithful and loyal companion. He saved the life of the infant son of a popular Knight. Legend has it he died a martyr, mistakenly killed by the very knight whose son he had saved. In death his popularity among the masses grew exponentially.

But the Vatican frowned on the continuing veneration of St. Guinefort. In fact they dispatched an Inquisitor named Etienne Bourbon who had Guinefort's body disinterred and burned, officially declaring him a heretic. Which is kind of funny. Because Guinefort in life really wasn't a great guy. He was the knight's faithful and loyal pet greyhound dog.

What makes that story especially funny to me is the Vatican's insistence that a dog could NOT officially be a saint. But apparently could officially be a heretic. (Really?)

In all, there are more than 10,000 saints recognized by the Catholic Church and even more by the Orthodox. Both insist there are many more saints than that--we just don't know all their names. John Paul the Second is credited with standardizing the Catholic canonization process in 1983 and he made sure it would be carefully supervised by Vatican officials.

Canonization is a two-step process. One miracle attributable to an intervening would-be saint qualifies him or her for what's called beatification. A second miracle is then required for Canonization--the official declaration of sainthood.

Pope Francis has canonized 898 saints so far in his career, including Popes John Paul II and John XXIII in 2014, and Mother Theresa four years ago.

You might think that's a lot of saints to be canonized by a single pope. But that number includes the so-called 813 Martyrs of Otranto, whose canonization process actually began nearly 500 years ago.

Along with Guinefort, there are some other interesting characters who have been counted among the Saints. Blaise is the patron of throat ailments and veterinarians. Denise oversees headaches and motorcyclists. Amand watches over both Boy Scouts and bartenders.

Saint Drogo supposedly had the ability to bilocate—that is to be in two different places simultaneously. Witnesses swore he'd be at work in the fields and attending mass at the same time.

Next to Guinefort, my next favorite saint is Christina the Astonishing. Witnesses swore she, in her lifetime, could levitate. Which came in handy. Seems Christina couldn't stand to be around other people, because she said she could smell their sins. She spent most of her life avoiding other people altogether. But when cornered, witnesses said she would often just float away. (Nice!)

The Reformation brought significant changes to the way we Protestants view saints and sainthood. First of all, Martin Luther dismissed the whole notion of purgatory as being non-Biblical. And Luther said ALL Christians are saints. But also sinners. Like the Apostle Paul, Luther used the word "saints" not only for the dead, but also those still living. Luther railed against the Catholic practice of invoking saints as intercessors before God, saying Jesus Christ is the only intercessor we have, or for that matter need. Luther said every time a miracle is attributed to a saint, it in effect diminishes Jesus Christ, the true source of all blessings.

My Catholic friends say the saints aren't such a big deal to them these days. And they don't see asking them for help as much different from asking a friend to pray for you.

Personally, I think we should continue to remember and honor our own personal saints-- not just for a year, but throughout our days. They are the people who have touched and shaped the very fabric of our being;

and who continue to influence our thoughts and feelings, our opinions and attitudes, even if no longer with us.

Today let us first thank God for letting such saints be a part of our lives, and then also remember the hope and promise of Christ that we will one day be reunited with them, in the loving arms of our God for eternity.

Personally my saints for the most part haven't been the kind of folks who could be in two places at once, or fly. And I'd be surprised if any of them worry much about bartenders or motorcyclists.

The saints I'll remember include my parents, grandparents; my father-in-law; aunts and uncles. And of course my brother Jay, my cousin Steve, some neighbors, friends, teachers, role models and mentors, including a few I have lost in the last year. And I confess, Guinefort isn't the only dog or pet who is still missed and fondly remembered by me today.

Be they Protestant or Catholic, Jews or agnostics, Human or other, today let us be grateful for the saints who made us better people, and this world a better place.

Neither superhuman nor superheroes. Mostly just regular folks, like the ones Jesus talked about today in his opening sentences from the Sermon on the Mount. Folks who were and humble and meek; merciful and pure in heart.

The ones who laughed with us and cried with us. Who were sometimes wise but often foolish. Folks who normally toed-the-line, but now and then broke the mold. Saints who taught us and helped to instill in us the very faith that gets us through each and every day. Especially the tough days, like the ones we are experiencing now, thanks to a brand-new virus. And while today is a day set aside to commemorate and commiserate, it is also a day to celebrate.

“Rejoice and be glad,” said Jesus. For even though at times like these it may not seem so, we ARE indeed still blessed. Because the sadness,

loneliness, pain and suffering of this world will soon enough be gone forever.

And God WILL INDEED wipe away every tear from our eyes. Let us give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His mercy endures forever.

Amen.