

Revelations 7:2-4, 9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we heard the Beatitudes, a passage set aside for the Vigil of All Saints to commemorate the faithful, those followers of Christ who have died. The Beatitudes are a litany of blessings—downright declarations of fact: Blessed are they . . . Blessed are you . . . Would you just look at the motley crew getting blessed by Jesus? Oh, yes, there are those who have been good—the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers. But then you have your meek ones. In this day and age, where we must be not just assertive but aggressive to get what we want, where we admire those who act like self-assured leaders, then meek folks look like positive wimps. And how about those who mourn? I know how miserable I appear when I've been crying—red-faced, nose running, puffy eyes. The ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness? Well, why don't they get off their duffs and do it themselves if they want something done?

They're getting the same rewards as the peacemaker and the merciful and the pure in heart, and even the martyrs who died for their faith! They're all promised that God has claimed them and they'll be with God in his kingdom. All of them blessed because Jesus said so.

Well, let me sort this out. That means this communion of saints we profess to believe in, this group of the faithful who have been blessed by God, are just as likely to have been wimps and crybabies as sincere in heart or martyrs burned at the stake.

So I look at the saints in **my** life, and I realize our family has struggled to polish them till they shine. But in reality they're a bit tarnished. And who tarnished them? They did . . . themselves . . . in their humanness, in their brokenness, in their frailties.

There's Johanna Burglund, my grandmother—a saint. She helped my Grandfather run a 13-acre farm, and she picked and cleaned and canned and pickled and froze vegetables, and gathered eggs and sold them downtown and supervised the Sunday School classes at St. John's Lutheran Church and was a member of Eastern Star and a mother to three and a grandmother to seven.

Then, one by one, tiny strokes over a ten-year period changed her, crippled her, robbed her of mobility and dignity and mind, and eventually, life. My five younger cousins and the aides at Elk Haven Nursing Home didn't know how Grandmother and I delighted in picking ripe red currants right off the bush and popping them into our mouths, how we'd sit on the swing till 11 o'clock at night (way past a child's bedtime), how she always kept candy in a drawer at my eye level. No, they never knew this person. They only knew a cranky old woman who yelled when they made noise in the house, an obstinate old woman who refused to follow her diabetic diet, a withdrawn old woman who no longer recognized faces and names, a crippled old woman whose body was slowly curling into a tight fetal position.

Johanna Burglund, my grandmother—a saint? Yes. A human being with a frail human body and numerous human problems who was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and who had trusted in that God. Yes, she was blessed by him.

Then there's Daniel Rouse, my brother . . . a saint. A year older than I, he was nice enough to play catch with me even though I was terrible at it. When I failed my driver's exam on a hot August day, my dignity shattered to pieces, he consoled me, took me to the Tastee-Freeze at the top of Boot Jack Hill and treated me to a cool lime-green slushie, patiently enduring my hiccupping sobs. And, at age 23, on the day he died, a few hours before he'd climb into his car and lose control of the wheel, he sent me a note telling me how proud he was of his little sister.

Danny, who had been a faithful member of First Lutheran Church and its adult choir, went to college where his worship attendance pretty much trickled down to nothing. He was a top student and a leader, but he often spent his weekends getting drunk and then violently ill with his fraternity brothers. After that, it was the stress of graduate school, and he told me that the amount of alcohol he consumed was directly proportional to the amount of depression and worry he was experiencing.

Daniel Rouse, my brother—a saint? Yes. A human being with a frail human body and numerous human problems who was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and who trusted in that God. Yes, he was blessed by him.

Hmmm. If my saints were actually less than perfect, tarnished as it were, yet loved and blessed by God, then perhaps the same goes for you and me. Just as many weaknesses. Just as many sins. Just as baptized into the life of the Triune God. And therefore, just as blessed.

A Lutheran pastor named Merle Franke has written a poem called “Who Tarnished My Saints?” I’d like to read you a portion of that poem.

*“I turn my confused head and find I’m standing on level  
ground with my heroes and saints  
They’ve been brought down to my level  
They’re no better than I  
Maybe worse, for heaven’s sake.*

*That bothers me because now  
Just maybe—whisper it softly  
Maybe I have to be a saint  
or hero or martyr or something.  
This lump of clay?  
With warts and faults and heart astray?*

*I am distraught that maybe God intends that I am a saint  
or maybe even a hero  
And as I stand in the embarrassment of my newfound discovery  
my blushing dawn  
I somehow perceive that God is smiling  
or shaking his head  
that it has taken me so long to discover who I am.”*

Saints shine, but not because we polish them. Saints shine because our God has overcome the tarnishing elements of life in this world—sin and death. God makes us shine by stripping off layer upon layer of corruption. God thoroughly polishes us with a soft chamois cloth bought with the price of his Son’s death on a cross.

God blesses his children not because of what they have done, but because he chooses to bless them with his forgiveness and eternal love. God blesses his people—Johanna and Danny, the faithful members of Trinity who have died this past year, the ones you have loved and lost, and the faithful members of the Church of Christ in every age to these past 2,000 years.

And God blesses you and me. AMEN.

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