

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

November 6, 2005
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Revelations 7:9-17; I John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

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

Mabel Abplanalp died last month at 99 years of age. She was the oldest parishioner in my home congregation. I remember her when I was kid, and I thought she was old **then**. But, boy, she was lively. She sang in the choir, served on umpteen committees, taught Sunday School and Wednesday afternoon Bible School—it would be well-nigh impossible to list all she did for the glory of God. Oh, life wasn't easy for Mabel. Her husband was committed to a mental institution and she worked all sorts of odd jobs to raise 4 kids single-handedly. And those four kids . . . and their kids . . . and **their** kids loved Mabel.

My mom tells me that four pastors officiated at the funeral. When you get four pastors from different churches in my hometown working together for a common goal—well, that says something. It says something about Mabel. It says something about the grace of God visible in Mabel's life. Her funeral was a celebration of a life lived in Christ, past, present and future.

Not every funeral has four pastors officiating, and a gathering of a loving extended family. I recall one funeral I had in a previous parish. His name was Gerald, and I'm sorry to say I can't remember his last name. He worshipped with us in fits and spurts, I always got to greet him at the door, but that was all I knew of him. He was rather eccentric, to say the least. His house was a packrat's delight, but a fire marshal's nightmare. He had a few cousins who helped organize his pitiful financial affairs, and they became the folks I met with to plan the funeral. They didn't have much to say about him. It wasn't that he was bad, but he just didn't fit in, didn't even try to fit in. When his wife died a few years back, he became more eccentric still. His cousins kept their distance while he lived, and maintained an air of detachment as we planned the funeral.

The funerals of people like Mabel who lived a long and full life—those funerals are such a celebration of the person's life among us that the worshipers present laugh as much as they cry. I know for pastors, those are the "easier" funerals to lead. But, oh, the funerals for those cut down in the prime of life by disease or accident. And, oh, the services for a stillborn infant, or a child who tragically dies. Those funerals are like a punch in the gut for everyone there. They just take all the breath out of us.

I remember how schizophrenic I felt as I officiated at two distinctly different funerals on the same day: In the morning, I led a service for a 96-year-old woman—beloved school teacher, world traveler, well-known to the townsfolk. In the afternoon, I stood in that same sanctuary, on that same spot, and led a service for a child stillborn whose only life had been in the womb, who had been known only to her parents, those eagerly awaiting her birth, and the God who loved her.

In our prayers today I will name for us every person from our congregation who died this past year since our last All Saints Sunday. A candle will be lit as each name is read. These candles are fairly uniform; they all pretty much look alike. Yet each flame represents a unique individual. Each and every person I'll name was a unique child of God. Some, perhaps, were like Mabel Abplanalp, with an active Christian faith quite visible to those around them. Some, also like Mabel, faced challenges that beat them down, yet received strength and courage from God to keep going. Some of these I'll name in prayer were perhaps a little more like Gerald—not well-known or even particularly well-liked, troubled or always getting into trouble.

Some of these Christian brothers and sisters I'll name lived long lives, years of reasonably good health right up to the end, and we look back, giving thanks to God for those years they enjoyed, and we with them. Some of those I'll name died much too young, and we grieve and rage at our enemies that are cancer and cardiac arrest, accidents and Alzheimer's.

Our lessons appointed for this All Saints Sunday remind us of the unique individuality of the children of God, and the unique circumstances of their lives. Yet, these lessons also remind us what unity exists among them. In Matthew, we learn from our Lord Jesus that God's blessings, God's favor rests on all kinds of people. For example, Jesus mentions those who possess virtues to which we would not want to aspire, like being meek (meaning powerless, door mats for others' domination). Jesus also names those who experience things we ourselves are reluctant to experience—the grief of those in mourning, the despair of those who have no hope, the righteous indignation of those who have been treated unrighteously and unjustly. **Then** Jesus names other kinds of people, and **this** set of people seems so different from the first set—Jesus **now** talks about those who show mercy, those who strive for peace, those whose minds are wholly devoted to God. Yet Jesus proclaims that **all** of these folks are blessed. Different as they are from each other, their life circumstances as varied as we can even imagine—those whose lives have seemed hopeless and unfulfilled, and those whose lives have helped us glimpse God—they are **all** recipients of God's favor as His kingdom erupts into our world and His will becomes a reality for all creation.

But what favor does God **show** for them? What blessings do they receive? Well, John says their ordeals are over. John gives us that vision in the book of Revelation, a portion of which we heard in our second lesson. John directed his vision to the church in his time, a fledgling church facing the threat of persecution and disciples being martyred for the faith. When John described those who suffered who were now at last in heaven with God, John said they were those who came out of the “great ordeal.” Some translations say they came out of the “great tribulation” which is an even more meaningful term for me.

“Tribulation” comes from a Greek word that means “grinding.” It originally referred to the threshing tools used to beat the stems and husks of grain—those tools literally ground down, squeezed, pressed upon the stalks of grain. So apply that term to the early Christians John wrote to who faced martyrdom, ground down by persecution and oppression. Or, apply that term to those we name in prayer this day who were ground down by disease or accident, age or chronic, debilitating pain. How are they blessed, these that have come out

of the great tribulation? **John tells us their tribulation is over.** John sees them standing in the eternal presence of God, singing for joy, without pain or tears or death ever to grip them again. Every single one of them—different as they may have been on this earth, different as they may have been in life span and circumstance. The death and resurrection of Christ Jesus has brought eternal life to every single one of them. God's love for them, made known in Christ Jesus, bestowed upon them in their baptism, has given them all the same name: child of God and blessed saint.

Okay, but we're probably quick to say Mabel Abplanalp was the real saint, the saintliest saint while others like Gerald were less so. We're quick to assume some people died so young they had no chance even to be a saint. Excuse me—we're all saints by the grace of God. We don't become saints because we performed miracles, lived sin-free lives, or maintained perfect attendance in Sunday School. We become saints by the call and favor of God. As different as each one of us is and as varied as our circumstances in life. This call and favor began at **our** Baptism. This call and favor continues throughout our life (whether long or short). This call and favor sends us in the name of Christ to be a blessing to others. And we **will** be a blessing to others—when we show mercy or strive for peace, when we console those who mourn, when we lift up those ground down by life, when we give hope to those who've had that hope squeezed out of them, and when we declare through the entirety of our life that God is with us, yesterday, today and tomorrow—in fact, all our tomorrows. **AMEN.**