

All Saints Day
Rev 7:2-17
November 1, 2009

Today is All Saints Day, the day when we recall that Jesus has one body, the church, which includes not only believers here on Earth, but also those who have died in the Faith. We believe our loved ones who inhabit Heaven enjoy the Beatific Vision of the Lord while awaiting the consummation of all things, ie. the Resurrection of their bodies, the General Judgment, and life everlasting. Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions tell us the blessed dead are fully alive in the Lord and intercede to the Father on our behalf. They are part of the *"whole host of Heaven"* that shows up here whenever we celebrate this Eucharist. These are folks who began life just like us, born in trespass and sin, but who were in a saving relationship with Jesus when their lives came to an end. For this we give thanks and praise to God and we give honor where honor is due.

"Our confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we should thank God for showing examples of his mercy revealing his will to save men, and giving teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are his greatest gifts, we should extol them very highly; we should also praise the saints themselves for using these gifts, just as Christ praises faithful businessmen (Matt. 25:21, 23). The second honor is the strengthening of our faith: when we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we are encouraged to believe that grace does indeed abound more than sin (Rom. 5:20). The third honor is the imitation, first of their faith and then of their other virtues, which each should imitate in accordance with his calling." (Ap. AC 21, 4-6)

So, let's sit with this for a minute and see if it might change the way we pursue the Christian life. Think of the most "saintly" person you know. Got someone in mind? That person, even if they're the second coming of "Mother Teresa," even if they are someone we would hold up as a poster child of Christian virtue, we also have to admit they have a dark side. There are parts of their life which we would love to claim as our own, but other parts in which they are unable to completely reflect the glory of God due to human frailty. They are what Dr. Luther called *"simil justus et peccator"* (simultaneously righteous and sinner). But the saints in Heaven are only *"justus"* and not at all *"peccator."* They are completely healed and whole, set free from every sin and vice, utterly void of any desire or attachment that is anything less than God Himself. Here's the question: have you ever considered how they got that way?

While it's obvious from our own example that sainthood begins on Earth, Heaven is the realm of "completed saints." And we know from Scripture that Heaven is a place where there is nothing sinful or unclean. Even our best poster child of holiness on Earth wouldn't make it past the threshold of Heaven. But today we honor people who have successfully navigated that transition. They currently ARE what we someday HOPE to BE—completely sanctified—spirit and soul—in the Lord. (The sanctification of the body will come as part of the General Resurrection.) The question remains, "How did they get this way?" We knew their brokenness and sinfulness when they walked our streets, but now they are completely pure and holy and in the presence of God. How did that transformation come about? What do I need to do to achieve this as well?

Someone once asked, "What do I need to do to be a saint?" And a wag responded, "The first step is to die!" And, on one level, that's true. The major line of demarcation between the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant is the veil of death. But is death the ONLY thing that sets us apart from them and the "better life" in Heaven? If that's all it is, what are we waiting for? Instead of plugging in the coffee pot in the Fellowship Hall we ought to mix up a big batch of Kool-Aid and cyanide and we'll meet up on the other side, by and by!

OK, maybe you recoil from the "Heaven by suicide" option. But as Lutherans, we reject the teaching that people who commit suicide automatically go to Hell, and so this course of action doesn't seem entirely unreasonable. It's simply the logical conclusion of being on the losing end of a daily battle against overwhelming circumstances. If you are truly despondent, if life is just one bout after another of unbearable pain (either physical or emotional) and Heaven is just one relatively painless act away, why not go for it? Even though suicide is murder and our lives are not ours to end, even murder is not the unforgivable sin. So, what's the obstacle?

Now, maybe you immediately see problems with that idea, but unfortunately it's the course of action that even some Christians take when the pain in their life is so unbearable that suicide becomes their one-way ticket "to a better place." So, while we're thankful for people who man the phones at suicide hot-

lines and for all the police officers who talk jumpers off the ledge, the best theological argument against suicide is that it's simply not a "short cut to heaven."

Last week was Reformation Sunday and you'll remember that we spent time on the theological truth that your faith in Jesus reconciles you to God. This is the doctrine of justification. But that's not the end of the story. Your character has to be refined, which is the doctrine of sanctification, and there's simply no "microwave short cut" to this process of character reformation. Death is not the only thing which differentiates us from the church triumphant. They are no longer "*sinful and unclean*" deserving both God's "*temporal and eternal punishment*." When was the last time anyone mentioned to you that we need both our justification (the eternal) and sanctification (the temporal) to be a complete and perfect unity before you enter Heaven? Knowing what mess our sinful friends and family were before they died, how did they get so squared away in order to enter into the joys of Heaven?

One option is that God really isn't serious about us making any progress in the sanctified life. If we do try to live according to His will, that's great, but if not, He understands! After all, we're just a sinful lot but so long as you just "believe"—that's all God really hopes for! If we've been trying live out the promises made at our Baptism, we might have a "not fair!" gut reaction against this, but Dr. Luther heartily embraced it. In a letter to Philip Melancton dated Aug 1, 1521 he wrote: "*If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly...as long as we are here in this world we have to sin...No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.*" (LW 42, p. 281)

So, even if you don't make any progress at all in living the Christian life during your 70 or 80 years, don't worry about it—you're covered! According to what we just heard, if you satisfy your base desires with a Roman orgy and then light up the Post Office with an Uzi to celebrate, you don't have to worry at all about meeting your maker when the SWAT team sniper takes you out. Not only isn't it a problem, but you make out like a bandit! You avoid prosecution and jail time in the state of Texas and when you get to the other side your guardian angel will run you through the quick rinse on the way to the Pearly Gates and you'll be dried and pressed before St. Peter can even look up your name on the reservations roster! What a deal!

OK, maybe that's a bit crass, and maybe that's far removed from what Dr. Luther intended, but whether or not we admit it, we do tend to live our lives with an operating theology which says if you're "saved" you'll somehow be instantly perfected and received into Heaven the moment you die, no matter what. If that's the case, then why should I go through all the hard work of "*picking up my cross and following Jesus*" or denying self, of turning the other cheek, of suffering wrong doing with patience, of living for others and letting the Holy Spirit mold and conform me to the image of Jesus if I'm going to get it all instantly handed to me anyway, in completed form without any trouble or effort on my part, in the moment I've drawn my last breath? Hmm...if curling up with a bag of chips on the couch and watching Simpsons reruns gets me the same result as heroic self-denial and the passionate pursuit of God's will, is it any surprise which way I'll choose? Where's that darn remote control?!

Now, that thought might not run across your conscious mind, but if you've ever chafed at any of my suggestions about taking on the "disciplines of Lent," of doing extra prayer, fasting, almsgiving, social justice, etc. then, running at the unconscious level in your psyche is this idea of "*instant holiness—just add death*." It sounds good, but unfortunately it's an idea that is theologically untenable in the face of what we know about the nature and character of God, that essentially He cannot simply look the other way at our character deficiencies and the consequences of our sinful actions and pretend everything is peachy. We can easily convince ourselves that nothing needs to be set straight or cleaned up before we get issued our harp and golden crown, but this goes against what we already know about God's love and justice.

Another option is that somehow our character is magically made perfect the moment we die. This is what Dr. Luther teaches in the Large Catechism. "*...the office and work of the Holy Spirit is to begin and daily to increase holiness on earth through these two means, the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins. Then, when we pass from this life, he will instantly perfect our holiness and will eternally preserve us in it...*" (LC II, 59) Someone has dubbed this idea "instant purgatory." It is interesting that we agree with our Roman Catholic friends that we need "perfection" of our holiness—it's just that we disagree with them on how long it takes! Whereas Catholic Grandma O'Hanlon might languish in Purgatory for who knows how long, Lutheran Grandma Schmidt gets "fast-tracked" in the system! That's a hoot!

Seriously though, Dr. Luther came to this conclusion as the result of heated theological debate around the indulgence controversy and after a long period of intense reflection and spirited theological exchange with his opponents. Like lots of good ideas that sounds great on paper, when it hits the street it often morphs into something quite different from what the originator intended. I think an unintended consequence of Luther's teaching is that it has encouraged us to become complacent, comfortably numb, spiritual sloths. Why bother striving for holiness it when it's coming to me as an entitlement? This is essentially the same "something for nothing" attitude that makes us cringe at people who know how to work the welfare system while we actually hold down jobs! Yet, that is precisely what we are doing in the realm of sanctification, where we are clearly called to partnership with God in doing good works, actively pursuing spiritual growth, avoiding sin, pursuing righteousness—not simply waiting for death to deliver it instantly to us on a silver platter.

As widespread as this "instantly-made-perfect-at-death" belief is today, it's worth noting that it's not the traditional view of the church. Throughout most of church history, Christians have believed that between death and Heaven is an "intermediate state" during which the on going process of sanctification, which is always unfinished during our mortal life, is finally completed. Some of us have more stuff than others which we'll need to divest before we enter the "clean room" of Heaven. Over time, the short hand term for this state of being came to be called "purgatory." It's interesting that it's named for what is supposedly accomplished there—for the mission that is being pursued—not as a geographical "place."

Unfortunately, by the time of the Reformation, the speculative theology of purgatory had evolved it into a way for you to pay for your sins, as though Jesus' atoning work on the cross was insufficient. To make matters worse, as part of the capital fund campaign to build St. Peter's Basilica, the stewardship board was selling "indulgences." You'll remember from last week that these were documents claiming that a person could buy time off purgatory for themselves or loved ones by donating money to the church. It was this commercialization of the afterlife which good Dr. Luther originally protested against on October 31, 1517:

82. To wit: -- "Why does not the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the dire need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter is most trivial." 86. Again: -- "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?" 89. "Since the pope, by his pardons, seeks the salvation of souls rather than money, why does he suspend the indulgences and pardons granted heretofore, since these have equal efficacy?"

Arguably, this is the most ingenious money-making scheme anyone has come up with to date in the church! Even so, during the early years of the Reformation, Dr. Luther attempted to "reform" the concept of purgatory to what it was intended to be. He writes, "*The existence of a purgatory I have never denied. I still hold that it exists, as I have written and admitted many times, though I have found no way of proving it incontrovertibly from Scripture or reason. I find in Scripture that Christ, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job, David, Hezekiah, and some others tasted hell in this life. This I think was purgatory, and it seems not beyond belief that some of the dead suffer in like manner. Tauler has much to say about it, and, in short, I myself have come to the conclusion that there is a purgatory, but I cannot force anybody else to come to the same result.*" (LW 32:95-96)

However, by the 1530's it was obvious to all that it was simply too difficult to reform this particular teaching. We might liken it to trying to reform the health care system or foster fossil fuel independence or unload an unwanted timeshare condo—a good idea, but simply too hard to do. Why? In the minds of simple, pious, Christian peasants, purgatory had become completely fused with the idea of paying for your own sins through the grotesque practice of selling indulgences. With other more crucial and more pressing theological battles to be fought, Luther eventually is forced into rejecting the concept of post-mortem sanctification altogether. Again, as we look at the history of the Reformation, we can understand why Dr. Luther came to the conclusion he did given the pressures which the leaders of the Reformation were under to develop a coherent theological position on a wide range of issues, essentially in "real time"—as they went from debate to debate with the Catholic theologians, all the while trying not to be burned at the stake.

The bottom line here in Luther's decision to suppress the historic understanding of the intermediate state was its "abuse" by the powers that be. However, just because something is being abused, doesn't invalidate it. The Holy Eucharist and the gift of tongues were both being abused in the church at Corinth, but St. Paul's solution was not to prohibit the practice of either, but to lay down guidelines for

proper use. At this point in time, almost 500 years later, maybe we can take a fresh look at the Scriptural data without the passions and politics of the Reformation influencing our judgment and conclusions.

While Scripture is admittedly scant on details of the next life, we do find hints that suggest there's some sort of refining process, whatever that is and however that might work, which believers must go through on their way to their eternal home. For example, Jesus says, "*Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*" (Mt. 5:25-26). Notice He says the person will eventually get out of prison, which tells us He's not talking about an eternal punishment. This person is clearly "saved" but there's something they must undergo before being released. The reference to a prison is certainly neither Heaven nor Hell. The damned never get out of Hell, and Heaven is no prison. What is the essence of Jesus' teaching? He's obviously not suggesting they have to pay their own way—that's what He's come to do for them. That's the message of the Gospel. Rather, Jesus is talking here about a person learning their lesson—we either learn to be reconciled with our adversaries now or we'll have to learn this later – and it's apparently in our own best interests to learn this now. There are no shortcuts.

Along similar lines, Jesus taught: "*The servant who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*" (Lk 12:47-48) Here again it's important to notice that for both servants the punishment comes to an end, which tells us Jesus isn't talking about a permanent punishment. Yet the punishments vary depending on severity of the servants' crime. The servant who knew his master's will and intentionally disobeyed will experience harsher punishment than the servant who didn't, presumably because intentional disobedience reflects a more hardened character that requires harsher disciplinary measures to be reformed.

In St. Matthew's gospel there is a tremendous confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, in which they accuse Him of exercising authority over demons by the power of Beelzebul, the "*prince of demons*" (12:24f). Jesus warns them of the sin against the Holy Spirit and states, "*Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.*" (12:31-32) If this sin cannot be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come, it's saying that some sins (or consequences of sins) are or will be or at least might be forgiven in the age to come.

While addressing the issue of sin within the ranks of the Christian community at Corinth, St. Paul writes: "*For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble — each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*" (1 Cor. 3:11-15). The passage is quite clear: gold and silver, when placed into a furnace, would be purified while wood and hay would be burned away. As this is done, Scripture says we will suffer loss, but be saved "*as through fire.*" What could St. Paul be referring to? He can't be referring to Hell because clearly the people who undergo this "purifying fire" will be saved, while those who are in Hell are lost forever. And yet Paul can't be referring to Heaven because he mentions the suffering of loss and in Heaven there is no suffering of any type, as St. John tells us "*every tear will be wiped away.*" (Rev. 21:4).

The point St. Paul seems to make is that, as God draws us to Himself after we pass through the experience of death, we experience a process of purification in the fire of God's holy presence. God Himself purifies us of those imperfect deeds (the wood, hay, and stubble) while those works performed in faithfulness and obedience to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit (those of gold and silver) are purified. This fire refines everything that is built on the foundation of Jesus but burns up everything that is not. The judgment isn't about whether or not a believer belongs to God. This purification is necessary because Scripture teaches that "*nothing unclean shall enter*" Heaven and its temple. (Rev. 21:27)

These passages usually don't even register with us because we've been steeped in the "all will be well—take it easy and don't worry" mindset. When you add in our "legal fiction" understanding of the

doctrine of justification, (for those of you who weren't here last week, that means God "declares" me righteous, but He doesn't actually effect any ontological change within me—I'm the same sinful jerk at the core of my being, it's just all "covered over" like a beautiful snow blanketing the dung heaps in an open field, to use Luther's description) it's easy to see why we've ignored the data.

So, while we are justified by faith alone in the atoning work of Jesus (ie. the snow blanket), we are nevertheless also called to yield to the Holy Spirit within us as we "*work out our salvation with fear and trembling.*" (Phil. 2:12) Compelled by the love of God (2 Cor. 5:14), we are called to "*purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*" (2 Cor. 7:1) In other words, letting the snow blanket melt away the dung hills it conceals until they are no more!

What our friends in the church triumphant would tell us this morning is that complete and total sanctification of our whole being—spirit, soul, and body—is not an optional extra that we can take or leave according to our pleasure at the moment. Judgment is unavoidable. They've been there—done that! They would remind us that whatever is not completed now will have to be completed later—it's not simply written off at the judgment seat because justice demands satisfaction.

They would remind us that it's in our best interest to complete as much of this process while we're on this side of death because now we can "run up the score" on the meritorious works scoreboard and be rewarded with greater levels of glory—but death ends this possibility. At that point, we're stuck with "*what we have done and what we have left undone*" for better or worse. The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations says: "*There will be no limitations or degrees attached to the enjoyment of the happiness to be experienced, though there will be degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth...*(2 Cor. 9:6; Matt. 20:23)."

We are all in training for eternity and life is the school that prepares us for Heaven. Like it or not, we will not be able to enter our eternal rest with those who have gone before us in the Faith until we're fully ready, with transformed lungs, to breathe the rarified air of Heaven. For this, there are simply no short cuts, so we might as well start to enjoy the learning process now. Amen.