

Sermon for Sunday, November 5, 2017 - Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
All Saints Day Sermon
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson
Preacher: Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

First Reading: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm: 34:1-10, 22; Second Reading: 1 John 3:1-3; Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

Beloved of God, called to be saints, grace and peace to you from Jesus our savior.

The last time I preached, I started my sermon by asking you to talk with one another about a question Jesus asked his disciples “Who do you say I am?”

Today I want to ask you another question in a similar vein, but don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to share your answers with your neighbor. Here’s the question: Who do you say that you are?

When you’re asked to introduce yourself at a meeting or social gathering, what do you say about yourself? I usually say something about my professional identity, where I come from, how long I’ve lived here, and maybe something about my family. But I guarantee you that never once have I introduced myself by saying: I’m Marion, a beloved child of God, and one of God’s saints. And I would venture to guess that you haven’t either.

Why don’t we claim this God-given identity for ourselves? Why can’t we accept that label as freely as the children do? It is, after all, the most important thing about us – about who we are at the very core of our being.

We heard this truth announced just a moment ago in the first letter of John: See what love the father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!

Pastor Amy reminds us of this stunning truth at the beginning of every sermon – addressing us as “Beloved of God.”

And when we gather at the Lord’s Supper we not only hear those precious words “given and shed for you,” we also taste and see how dearly God loves us.

So on some level we do know, at least in our heads, our truth of our identity as a Beloved Child of God, as one of God’s saints. And if we were given a quiz and asked: Who does God say that you are? We’d more than likely be able to give the correct answer. But in the rush and confusion of our day to day lives, we have trouble hanging onto that truth, at least I do. (And so I find myself longing to know not only in my head, but in my heart, who I am in God.)

There are so many demands upon us, so many big and small things that need our attention, it’s easy to forget this deeper and profound truth of our lives – that we are God’s beloved children, chosen, gifted, and called to be the living saints through whom God’s love is shared with the world.

But it’s not only our busyness and distraction that causes us to forget who we truly are. It’s also that there are an awful lot of days when we just don’t feel much like God’s beloved child or

living saint. We know how often we speak and act in ways that are not loving, that don't reflect God's love for us and for our neighbor. We remember those times when we have acted in anger or frustration, causing pain in someone's life. We know how often we have turned away from someone in need, failing to offer the kind word or gesture of compassion. And yet, in spite of all that God persists in loving us - Not because of what we've done, or what we've left undone, but just because of who we are, and even more – because of who GOD is. God doesn't wait to love the person we might be, the person we've promised to be, or the person we're trying to be. God loves us right now – warts, scars, and all.

Beloved, we are God's children now! The writer of First John repeats himself in his letter, because those dear Christians way back then must have had a difficult time believing that truth about themselves, just as we do.

But then the writer goes on with this wonderful announcement: what we WILL BE has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

What we will be....What a wondrous thought – that there is more to who we are than what meets the eye, and that our true identity as beloved children and beloved saints, is something of a mystery, and remains hidden in God. It is certainly hidden from the world that cannot see beyond our accomplishments or failures, our wealth or poverty, our abilities or disabilities, our physical appearance or limitations. Yet even if the world cannot see who we really are, and even though we ourselves may struggle to believe it, our core identity as God's beloved child, and beloved saint, is held securely in God, whose unconditional love and mercy hold us fast, and none of the powers of this world can ever change that.

Do you see what that means? No matter what you may have done, or had done to you, you are God's beloved Child. No matter where you have been or where you may go, God will be with you. No matter what you may have said, or have had said to you, God will keep you in God's heart now and forever. And we God's promise that, in the end, all that we are and do will be gathered into Christ and somehow the totality of who we are will look like him. That means, of course, that God is not done with us. That God has something more in store for us –God is at work in us now to love the world through the unique person God has created each of us to be.....Even in those parts of our lives where we have experienced the deepest suffering, the greatest shame, the most searing pain – God's inexhaustible power to bring life out of death is continually at work to redeem our suffering, our failure, and our sin, and through us to work for the healing of the world that God loves.

Some of you are probably familiar Thomas Merton a Trappist monk and Christian mystic, and writer. He was someone who understood deeply our true identity as God's beloved children. In 1958 when he was out on a routine shopping trip in in Louisville, KY he had a powerful experience of God's love. He was standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets, in the center of the busy shopping district, surrounded by people, when he was suddenly engulfed in a blinding epiphany of God's love. It was as if he was able to see the people all around through God's eyes – with a kind of spiritual sight. In that moment he recognized the God-given connectedness of all people, and the divine love that binds us together. Writing about that experience he said: If only everybody could realize it! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. Then it was as if I suddenly saw the beauty of their hearts....the core of their reality, the person that each one is in

God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are.....blazing with the invisible light of heaven.....

Beloved Children, God's Living Saints, may you know in both head and heart how precious you are – how deeply and fully God loves you. And may you go out into the world shining like the sun and blazing with the invisible light of heaven.