

Matthew 5:1-12; 1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 7:9-17 - “Eternal Existence”

Pr. Kurt A. VanFossan - All Saints Day (Observed) 2023

Today we celebrate “All Saints Day,” which is officially observed on November 1st. I thought it was interesting that some of the calendars on our AI/Artificial Intelligence devices (like my iPad) don’t mention “All Saints Day” on November 1st, but they do mention the “Day of the Dead” on November 2nd. Instead of becoming too upset about this world’s concerted effort to depart from our Christian world view, I decided instead to refresh my memory on the background behind the “Day of the Dead,” as part of my concerted effort to lead others who believe in the false teachings of this world to the truth of God’s Word.

The “Day of the Dead” is primarily a Mexican holiday where some believe that the souls of the dead come back to this world for a brief reunion with family and friends that includes food, drink, and celebration. Where do these souls supposedly come back from? According to Aztec mythology, they were in the “Land of the Dead,” which consists of nine levels they must work their way through before reaching their final resting place, which is similar to what we call paradise.

The Roman Catholic church unofficially adopted some of these “Day of the Dead” ideas into their own unscriptural teaching about praying for the souls of those suffering in what they call “Purgatory.” This is also a mythical stopping off place where those who die continue to try and make atonement for their sins.

What about Christ’s payment for our sins? It’s not enough, according to Roman Catholic teaching. This, however, is in direct conflict with the Good News that, as St. John wrote in the chapter prior to our Epistle reading, “[Jesus Christ] is the propitiation [the sufficient payment or atonement] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). That’s why St. John writes in our Epistle reading that “everyone who thus hopes in [Jesus Christ] purifies himself as He [Jesus] is pure.” This emphasizes the Good News that “by grace you are saved through faith [in Jesus Christ]. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But remember, our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Roman Catholic church, are not our enemies, it’s the spiritual forces of evil working through false teaching and teachers. Therefore, God calls us to continue to speak His truth in love, especially the truth of God’s love and forgiveness for us often misguided sinners.

The same holds true when it comes to the hard-hearted atheists in this world. Many of them have a completely different perspective of death. C.S. Lewis, when he was an atheist, saw death as an exit door into non-existence, which I think is the view of most of those today who claim no religion; that when you die you cease to exist. In C.S. Lewis’ mind, before he became a Christian, he considered death as a welcome choice available to him if ever life in this world became unbearable. He could always end his life, which he believed at that time would end his existence as well as his suffering.

What Good News God has for all those who live restless lives either trying to do what only God can do—to save themselves from suffering and death, or who see no meaning to human existence. The Good News is that human life is so incredibly important and beautiful that almighty God was willing to take on human flesh in Jesus Christ for the rest of His eternal life in order to give and sustain in us eternal life instead of eternal death.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us,” that He was willing to become a man so that He could suffer a damning death on a cross in order to save us from a

similar fate. Out of all the illustrations I have used to help us remember various things about God's love for us, this crucifix is the most helpful. The crucifix reminds us of the ultimate display of God's love for us. "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13).

But focusing on Jesus' resurrection from the dead is important too, which the empty cross, like the empty tomb, may remind us of. Jesus resurrection from the dead reminds us of His power as God over life and death, and His power to do what He promises—to free us from our sins, death, and all the forces of evil in us and around us, and give us eternal life with Him in both body and soul, not only in the world to come, but here and now. "*Beloved, we are God's children now.*"

Jesus' Beatitudes in our Gospel reading emphasizes this same Good News not only of our eternal future in paradise, but also of our new life as God's children here and now. "*Blessed **are** the poor in spirit [present tense], for theirs **is** the kingdom of heaven*" [present tense]. One way we can think about Jesus' Beatitudes is as a reversal of His Ten Commandments. Take for example the 1st Commandment, "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 3:20). This commandment shows us most clearly that we are sinners who over and over again put other things and people (especially ourselves) before God, and therefore deserve God's condemnation. But in Jesus' 1st Beatitude He reverses this curse and says that we are blessed. "*Blessed **are** the poor in spirit, for theirs **is** the kingdom of heaven.*" We are blessed not because of anything we do. We are "*poor in spirit.*" We are blessed because of what Jesus did when He paid the full price for our sins and opened to us the kingdom of heaven, now and forever!

This same Good News was proclaimed to us sinners at the beginning of the Divine Service this morning. We confessed the truth that we are "*poor in spirit*"—poor, miserable sinners who deserve God's eternal punishment. Yet God pronounces His blessing over us by saying, "*I forgive you all your sins.*" Like Jesus' 1st Beatitude, this is pure Gospel. Instead of getting what we deserve because of our sins, we are given all the benefits of what Jesus earned for us through His death and resurrection—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Him. The kingdom of heaven "*is*" ours. "*We are God's children now!*"

The more God strengthens our faith in this Good News, the more He enables us to rejoice in the fact that all those who have departed this life believing in Jesus Christ as their Savior are not suffering in a land of the dead or an imaginary place called purgatory where they would be working forever to pay for their sins. Instead they are living in the eternal presence of their merciful and loving God. And we will soon join them! Letting the troubled and despairing of this world know that this Good News is meant for them as well is our great purpose/privilege in this life.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

[Children's Sermon] In our first reading from the last book of the Bible, Revelation, God gave St. John a peak into heaven, where all those who believe in Jesus go when they leave this world. St. John also said that those in heaven stand before "*the Lamb,*" who is in the midst of the throne of God. Who is John talking about? Jesus, "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). [point out the Lamb on the stained glass window].

Jesus pictured as a lamb reminds us that God became one of us when He was born in the baby Jesus, since we are also called God's sheep or little lambs. God became a human being like us so that He could rescue us (through His death and resurrection) from all the bad things in this world, including the bad things we do.

But Jesus is not only a lamb like us, He is also our Good Shepherd. "*The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,*" who not only rescues us from our sins, death and the devil, but who continues to be with us to take care of us now and forever. Here's a little lamb for each of you, to remind you that Jesus is not only a lamb like us, but He is also our Good Shepherd who takes care of His little lambs—you and me.