

November 5, 2017 All Saints Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Becoming a Saint

How does someone become a saint? Officially, there are a number of steps: After the death there's a waiting period, sometimes years, sometimes centuries; there is a collection of evidence for and testimonies of a life of virtue, miracles or martyrdom; there's careful examinations and consultations that lead to beatification and canonization, conferring on a person the title of "Saint" with a capital "S."

Today is All Saints Sunday, and so in the bulletin you'll find a list of names that will be read aloud as part of the prayers. The list in our bulletin suggests another way to become a saint—saint with a small "s." You become a saint when you die.

Death doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints, as the musical *Hamilton* tells us. It is all too true. Death doesn't discriminate. The good die. All too often the good die young. And so do the bad. Often, bad choices in life lead to early deaths. Other times, people do very bad things for a very long time, live very long, very bad lives. But good and bad, old and young, we all die. It is one thing we all have in common; it is what it means to be mortal. We know it to be true, as the song from *Hamilton* says, as this Sunday says, as this Sunday names with a list of names. One of the things we do on All Saints Sunday is acknowledge our mortality. Death doesn't discriminate.

Neither does God. God does not discriminate between the good and the bad. In the eyes of God, our mortal categories, our moral categories, collapse. This is something we acknowledged last Sunday, Reformation Sunday. In a key text for the Reformation, Romans chapter three, we hear that God does not discriminate, "There is now no distinction," Romans three says, "There is now no distinction, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

We know this to be true, too. It is another thing we'll acknowledge this Sunday in the sacrament of baptism. Michelle and Chris will bring their infant, Emma, up to the baptismal font. Emma will be surrounded by mortals: worship leaders, her parents, her godparents. We'll hear what baptism is, and make promises about our part in it, and then all of us together will acknowledge another aspect of our mortality: we all sin.

It's a stark part of the sacrament. It's a heavy thing to say about an infant. As much as a baby melts my heart, makes me want to reach out my arms and hold this little miracle, as delighted as I always am to be part of this special, precious event in the life of a family, despite all those soft and tender feelings, I also find this stark element of the sacrament incredibly important, for as surely as she breathes, Emma shares this with the rest of us, too: we all sin. In the sacrament of baptism, we acknowledge this. In baptism we acknowledge that there are bad things in the world—around us, and within us. There are acts of terror, pedestrians and tourists who get killed by a murderous truck driver. There are politicians, leaders, who lie, make a web of lies, use the web to lie. There are people in authority who take advantage, often of women, harass and treat them as objects. There are times we keep silent when these things should be named. There are people we are silent about, overlook, ignore, people whom God calls blessed.

In the rite of baptism we name this. We name sin. And then we renounce it.

There is a list-like quality to this part of the sacramental rite. There is a list like quality to the three renunciations, and the three affirmations: affirmations of faith in the creator of all, the redeemer of all, the sustainer of all; affirmations about the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins—all these affirmations part of an ancient, baptismal creed.

We can make these affirmations, we can have this confidence, we can boldly say, “I believe” because God does not discriminate; grace does not discriminate. It gives and it gives and it gives. There is perhaps no better picture of this than in the baptism of an infant, in which we see promise, and power, poured out onto a person—a very tiny, very helpless person. Grace is poured out onto them, not because of anything they have done, but because of who God is. God does not wait for it; God does not wait for us to be worthy. God loves us, and so makes us worthy. God names us as his children, and so we can be. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.” (1 John 3:1)

We are children of God; we are saints and sinners, as Martin Luther said.

When Luther said this, that we are both saints and sinners, he did not mean that some are good and some are bad, though it is true that many are complicit in evil, including ourselves, and that there are other ways of living, ways which increase justice and kindness and peace, and that there are blessed people who show us what this looks like. We can name them, look to them, be guided by them, try to emulate them.

When Luther said that we are both saints and sinners, he did not mean that each one of us is a mixture of good and bad—though this is true, too. In the course of a life, in the course of a day, our thoughts and actions are mixed. They are mixed every single moment and over the entire course of a lifetime. This is important to remember as we read that list of names, the saints we name aloud today. They are mixed, too. They were not all saints all the time.

But we can name them as such, because of what Luther did mean about us being both saints and sinners, which is this: we are all sinners in the eyes of God, but that is not the only way that God chooses to see us. It is not the only way, nor is it the primary way, nor is it the final way. At life’s beginning and at its end, as with a baby at a font and as in the way of all flesh when we die, this is how God chooses to see us, this is God’s vision of us and for us, this is the revelation of the God who put on flesh: God sees us through the waters of grace, united with Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, forgiven, free.

This, then, is ultimately how one becomes a saint: in baptism. In baptism we become saints and are invited to a life of becoming: becoming more than we are, living into the vision God has for us, being reformed, being transformed, something that can only be described as miraculous.

We welcome you, St. Emma, into the communion of saints, and the life everlasting.
Amen.