

“Destined for Salvation”

a sermon based on

Revelation 7:89-17 & with Matthew 5:1-12

and delivered on

November 1, 2020

All Saints Day (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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As I prepared for today, it dawned on me just how unusual the last year has been. I hushed the church secretary, Nancy, when I asked her to get me a list of church members who'd died since All Saints Day last year. I hushed her when she noted that only there were only two members...

"Hush! Don't say it. The last time a church secretary said what you're about to say, I had twenty-two funerals in the following twelve months."

Since we last came together to celebrate all the saints in our lives, only two church members have died. I have only officiated at one funeral: the least in twenty-one years of ordained ministry (even when I was an associate pastor and the senior pastor led most of those services).

But that's not the unusual part. It is unusual but not the part that got me pondering. Last month, for the first time in my ministry, I had the privilege to celebrate two marriages on back-to-back weeks. That means – that, in the past twelve months, I have (for the first time) officiated at more weddings than funerals – twice as many.

Statistically, if the marriages hold together as hoped, there should only be half as many weddings in a given year. Right? It takes two persons for a wedding but only one for a funeral.

Bear with me – I have a point that will bring us back to All Saints Day.

The marriages to which I was invited to serve, included our own Jordyn Burritt (now Nystrom) as the pastor of this congregation, and another for Cody Carson whom I hadn't seen in several years before we began the pre-marital sessions.

I'd been Cody's pastor years ago, when he was a boy in a particularly challenging confirmation class. I got the call that Cody wanted me to officiate at his wedding. There have been two occasions when those I've known in youth have called to ask me to marry them. I've always called the pastor at the church before giving a definite answer. But that's another discussion.

What's interesting about those calls is that I've never – zero times – I've never had kid in my youth group when I served as a youth pastor – or a kid in a confirmation class – say to me, "When I get married, I want you to do it." Never.

Funerals on the other hand. I've heard that several times. When it's from someone in the parish, I usually express my hopes that that will not be an issue of concern for some time, not knowing where ministry will take me. I am a United Methodist – I go where the bishop sends me. Sometimes the request is different.

My sister-in-law, Susan's sister, has stated that she wants me to do her funeral. She never really "asked," but it's a different sort of situation. The irony is that although we're family, I've only seen her maybe two dozen times. Susan and I have been married for about 13 ½ years, so my time with Francis has been once a year a Thanksgiving, with the occasional wedding, funeral, or Labor Day party. I really don't know her all that well. To keep this in perspective, Susan's siblings are older than my parents. When we get together for Thanksgiving, I'm usually on the couch next to the nephews watching football.

During one of my hikes this week, as I pondered all these things and what I would say for today, I wondered what will I say at my sister-in-law's service. Our deepest theological discussion has been the expectation that I give the blessing at Thanksgiving dinner. What Scripture would I use?

Then it dawned on me, the Beatitudes – the blessings, that we heard today in the Gospel reading. Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, etcetera. I'm not going to go into her funeral sermon now – and hopefully not for some time.

Don't these blessings serve as our hope, today? Isn't the nature of these blessings that we've experienced in the persons we honor today that leads us to number them among the saints – as those who have not only been blest, but who have been blessing, as well?

Usually when we hear the word saint, we think about those celebrity saints. Don't we? We think about those great figures of faith or those whose sainthood had been canonized (that is officially recognized on behalf of the church). Early on in the life of the church that canonization required martyrdom; but it never dismissed the everyday sainthood of those called by God to claim the blood of the Lamb – the blood of Jesus' death on the cross – as their death to life apart from God.

In Revelation, John reports his vision of the great multitude – so great that no one could count, from every time and place – standing before the throne of the Lamb dressed in white. (Rev 7:9) When he asks who they are, he's told:

“These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.” (Rev 7:14-15)

This is the promise of salvation for all people: the healing that God promises in death for the faithful is the opportunity to stand before the throne of God without fear or inadequacy but confident in his love. God has destined each one of us for that promise, through Jesus' atoning work on that cross. His grace is not limited as some would say that some are predetermined for heavenly glory and others for hellish death. God so loved the world that the Son came that ALL might be saved – all might be healed and renewed to that perfect union intended from the beginning. God has offered each soul the path to that destiny. Those who choose that path, whether they get lost or stray from time to time, we call saints – trusting that God's guidance is better than any GPS navigation system – continually seeking to re-route us toward that same promise.

We are destined for salvation – that's God's plan for each of us. We are destined to stand in the presence of the Almighty confident of our place. Today, as those who have mourned, let us claim the blessing of God's comfort as we rejoice in the knowledge, that those who've been among us and chosen to follow that path laid out for them (no matter how imperfectly) – let our weeping turn to laughing and our mourning turn to dancing – in the sure and certain hope that each of the saints who have gone before us have heard those wonderful words, “You have arrived at your destination,” as we too claim the blessings of this life for ourselves and one another looking for that day when we shall arrive, as well. AMEN.