

# “A Saint by Any Other Name”

Revelation 7:2-17, I John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints Sunday – November 5, 2017

Perhaps you’ve heard of it! Perhaps, you have even visited it! I am speaking about a Greek-revival-style mansion that was built in Arlington, Virginia in 1818—named “The Arlington House!”

My friends, this magnificent structure was built as a living memorial to the late President George Washington by his step-grandson, as part of a beautiful estate of some 1100 acres across the Potomac River from Washington DC.

Decades later, a distant cousin of our first President; a man named Robert E. Lee would also become the chief resident of this glorious mansion.

Between 1846 and 1857, however, Lee was forced to be away from his beloved Arlington House:

(1) First because he was serving as a military commander in the Mexican-American War from 1846-1848.

(2) Secondly because he next served as the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, that incidentally, just happened to also be Lee’s ALMA MATER!

Finally, in 1857, Lee returned to the Arlington House to be reunited with his wife Mary Anna and with his children where they lived for the next four years, from 1857 to 1861. It was then, however, in 1861 that the Commonwealth of Virginia ratified an alliance with the Confederacy and seceded from the Union.

Lee, who had been a Major General for the Virginia Military Forces in April 1861, feared for his wife’s safety and anticipated the loss of their family inheritance! Therefore he moved her and his family to a new residence.

But wouldn’t you know it!?! Immediately following the ratification of secession by Virginia, Federal Troops crossed the Potomac and took up positions all around Arlington.

In punishment of Robert E. Lee for his allegiance to the South, the land was then **made into a national cemetery so that Robert E. Lee would never be able to claim the Arlington House** as his residency ever again. The Arlington National Cemetery was established there on June 15, 1864.

Even though Arlington National Cemetery may have been created as an act of retribution, it has become a tribute to our fallen warriors in battle. The over 400,000 graves on site are a remembrance of those who made the supreme sacrifice for our country; both casualties of war and veterans. The white tombs arranged in straight lines as soldiers in formation are not unlike the white robes of the saints of martyrdom pictured for us in the Book of Revelation, surrounding the throne of God!

**THE PARALLEL MESSAGE IN OUR THREE APPOINTED BIBLE READING FOR ALL SAINTS DAY IS ONE OF SACRIFICE.** It is a message of believing so much in a cause that **NO SACRIFICE IS TOO GREAT IN SUPPORT OF THAT CAUSE; EVEN THE SACRIFICE OF SURRENDERING ONE’S OWN LIFE!**

There are, of course, many noble causes for which one can make the supreme sacrifice, and on “All Saints Sunday” we remember with grateful hearts those men and women of God who died in service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

**But to truly celebrate this day properly, we must recall that Christ Jesus is the One who suffered the ultimate sacrifice in his death on the cross to redeem us and to make of us now by God’s grace—a people “holy” and “acceptable” to him. Jesus suffered the ultimate sacrifice as the One who was completely free of sin, but was willing “to bear our sins in his body unto death on a tree that we might die to sin and live now to righteousness; for by his wounds,” Peter writes, “we have been healed” (I Peter 2:24).**

My friends, two of the best known lines that William Shakespeare ever wrote are written down for us in two of his most-loved plays, first of all “HAMLET” and then secondly in (his best-known play), “Romeo and Juliet.”

In the first scene of the Third Act in Hamlet, Prince Hamlet asks himself a question out loud, as he contemplates his own death and the possibility of suicide, while bemoaning the pain and the unfairness of life! His greatest dilemma is that Hamlet does not know what life after death might hold in store for him!

To be or not to be, that is the question! Whether 'tis nobler in the mind  
To suffer he slings and arrows of outrageous fortune;  
Or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them?  
To die, to sleep; no more and by a sleep to say we end the heartache  
And the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to!

While there are many, many people today who are living with the same kind of uncertainty dwelling in their hearts and minds that Hamlet is experiencing here, this is not the dilemma of those people who have been given a second birth into the kingdom of heaven—through the Gospel—through the good news of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The faith of the Christian is:

And yet there breaks a far more glorious day;  
The saints triumphant rise in bright array!  
The King of Glory passes on his way! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

Another well-known line of William Shakespeare is found in his best-known, most-loved play: “Romeo and Juliet!” It is a line that Juliet speaks to Romeo, in a dialogue between these two star-crossed lovers, who love each other so deeply, but whose respective parents are violently opposed to their hope of one day being married. Romeo and Juliet are the direct descendants of two families who have been feuding with each other for years; the Capulets and the Montagues with Juliet being a Capulet and Romeo being a Montague! Juliet’s words to Romeo are:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy! Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.  
What’s a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face,  
Nor any other part belonging to a man! O be some other name!  
What’s a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet!

Juliet’s parents are opposed to their union, because in their minds, their last names are their primary grounds as to why these two young people should never be a part of the other’s life!

But when Juliet says: “A rose by any other world would smell just as sweet,” she is implying that the importance of a person or a thing is the way it is; not because of what it is called. Simple this means that the names of things cannot affect what they actually are. The only meaning behind a name is to distinguish one thing from another as well as to distinguish one person from another! Brothers and sisters the case that I am pleading before you today is that: “A saint by any other name would be just as holy!” And there are many other names that are given to Jesus’ followers all throughout the New Testament, aren’t there?

Yes, take the name of “disciple,” if you please! Two-Hundred and Sixty times (260) in the New Testament, Jesus calls his follower a “disciple” or in the plural form, his “disciples” with the word “disciple” meaning that a true follower of Jesus Christ is a lifelong student of his Word, not only by learning Christ’s word but also allowing those words of Christ to shape our whole approach to everything and to everyone as we may our way through life! To be a disciple, if

need be, is to suffer hardship and persecution for the name of Christ. A disciple is not afraid to witness to Christ in the presence of others out loud. A disciple, is also a person, Jesus says, who if they leave their house or their brothers and their sisters or mother or father or lands behind them, will also receive a hundred fold already in this lifetime, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers, with persecution, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29-30).

Christ the Good Shepherd calls us his “sheep” (John 10:27-29). Christ the Vine tells us that we his “branches” (John 15:1-8) and that we must remain vitally connected to him if we are to ever bear fruit at all in this world to our Heavenly Father’s glory.

St Peter tells us that we who are Christ’s followers, alive in the world today are “living stones,” being built by God into a “spiritual house,” the church, with Christ Jesus being himself the Chief Cornerstone; but “living” stones (I Peter 2:4-6)?

How can stones be living? In the same way that clay from the ground compacted and formed into the shape of a human being can become a living thing too when the LORD God Almighty—bends down—anthropomorphically speaking—and breathes into Adam’s nostrils “the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7)!

### **ANOTHER NAME, GOD ASCRIBES TO US, IS THAT OF BEING HIS CHILDREN**

If a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet; then a saint by any other name would be just as “holy.” And isn’t there another beautiful name for “saint” that the Apostle John gives to us in our epistle lesson this morning (I John 3:1-3)? *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called ‘children of God;’ and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared! But we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is! And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (I John 3:1-3)!*

“Children of the Heavenly Father, safely in his bosom gather. Nestling bird; nor star in heaven; such a refuge e’er was given!”

Brothers and sisters, the Apostle John was not a young man when he wrote these words. He could easily have been a man, by this time, in his 90’s and maybe even pushing 100 years old! You would think that by this time he could have easily taken his place in the family of God for granted. But the aged apostle John apparently did not! Can’t you just hear the great sense of wonderment and enthusiasm and great personal delight in John’s voice that comes across to us when he says: *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God; and so we are!” (I John 3:1)*

Have you ever seen the musical “Annie?” All the children in the orphanage hope that someday, someone will want to take them home and make them their own children.

Never in Annie’s wildest dreams could she have ever thought that someone as rich and wonderful as “Daddy War Bucks” would end up choosing her to be his own daughter and invite her to come and to live with him!

Why would anyone ever want someone as plain and ordinary as Annie perceived herself to be, to become their adopted child? For a long time, Annie questioned herself. For Annie, this new reality she was experiencing was so doubtful to her that she needed it to become a “*pinch-me-and-tell-me-it’s-real*” kind of experience.

So it is also in being a child of God—but in a much, much more dramatic way because it is real. Left to myself there is no reason for which I ought to hold this hope in my God that God would want me and choose me to become his very own child.

I have no right of birth because the human race lost the right to be counted in God’s family when Adam and Eve fell into sin. And every one of was in that same category as we heard Paul remind us last Sunday: *“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are justified by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith!” (Romans 3:23-25)*

Paul says the same exact thing in a slightly different way when he writes in Ephesians 2:3-7, *“We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up to be seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus!”*

**But on this All Saints Sunday, God himself invites us to think about our identity in our relationship to him; as that of being his children**—and as those of us who know for a certainty also, from the clear teachings of the Holy Scriptures, that our **God has called us to be “saints,”** just as he called the believers in Rome and in Corinth and in Ephesus to know and believe that they were saints—“holy ones”—made holy through the shed blood of our Savior for us on Calvary’s cross!

We know that our God has called us to be “saints.” Why St. Paul begins the vast majority of his letters to the various New Testament congregations he is writing by addressing the members of those churches to be “saints.”

Take the beginning of his letter to the church at Colossae: *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father!”* In his opening words to the church at Philippi, Paul writes: *“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* In his opening words to the churches at Corinth and Rome he calls the many people who are believers there “saints.”

The English word “saint” is derived from the Latin word *sanctus* which means “holy,” and is most always used to translate the Greek word in the New Testament *hagios*, which also means “holy one,” or those “set apart” to be used by God as his own people for his own special purposes the word appears 229 times in the Greek New Testament.

As we Lutherans read and study the New Testament Scriptures, we believe that all Christians, whether in heaven or on earth, are regarded by God to be saints. While Lutherans may refrain from praying to the saints in glory, *since there is only Mediator between God and man; the man Christ Jesus who loved us and gave himself up for us all (I Timothy)*, we are still given the opportunity to celebrate various “Saints’ Days” on the liturgical calendar.

Philip Melanchthon, the author of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, approved honoring the saints by saying that they are best honored by us in three different ways:

- (1) First by our thanking God that he has made of them examples of his mercy;
- (2) Secondly, that by their testimony to Christ and their willingness to suffer for him they also serve to strengthen our own faith; and
- (3) Thirdly, we honor them when we do our best with the help of the Holy Spirit to imitate their faith and other virtues.

Who are the saints? Doesn’t St. John answer this question so beautifully for us in our First Lesson this morning from Revelation 7:9-17? Here the aged Apostle John is exiled on Patmos and one day, on the Lord’s Day, on a Sunday, when suddenly he was caught up by God’s Spirit out of himself and given the opportunity to glimpse into the very corridors of heaven and then commanded to write down what he saw.

And what did St. John see there? He saw all of God’s saints in glory gathered around the throne of God, together with the 24 elders. And one of the elders asked John, *“Who are these clothed in white robes and where did they come from?”* And John said to him, “Sir, you know!” And the elder said to John, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Amen