All Saints Day
A Weird, Wonderful Family
I John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 7:9-17
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With the holidays coming up, a lot of you may have family gatherings that you're anticipating. Those can be gatherings that we anticipate with happiness and excitement or with anxiety and dread depending on what your family and the relationships within your family are like. Family can be great, and sometimes not great, but either way, being part of a family is something that shapes our identity and influences the way we see and interact with the world. This is true of our biological families, and it's also true about our spiritual family which is the family we are thinking about today on All Saints Sunday.

Our Scripture readings for today are the assigned readings for All Saints Day, and rather than just reading one or two, I wanted us to hear all three of the NT readings because the message emerges from all the texts as we listen to them in progression from I John to Revelation. So, let's begin by listening first to the reading from I John 3:1-3.

1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; 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.3 And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

This reading gets us thinking right away about our spiritual family when John reminds us of the truth that God confirms at our

baptism. That is, that we have been claimed and adopted as God's own children, and we are, indeed, *family* who have and belong to the same Heavenly Parent. This is good news and a gift because no matter what the truth is about our earthly relationships – whether we are part of a good family, a bad family, or no family at all- we can be confident that we are part of God's family where we are and always will be loved; where we belong and always will belong.

Being a part of God's spiritual family is like being part of an earthly family. There are the brothers and sisters that are sometimes hard to get along with, and the eccentric aunts and uncles that can embarrass you in public, but it's also like being part of an earthly family in that it gives us an identity and influences the way we live in the world. Earthly families have culture, values, and traditions. They have a name and sometimes physical traits that they share that set them apart from other families and make it easy for people to identify the members of the family. When I was in elementary school there was a girl in my class who had dark black hair that she wore in perfect ringlet curls. She also had a younger sister and even if no one told you, it was easy to pick out who her younger sister was because she had the same dark hair that she wore exactly the same way as her big sister. There was a likeness between them because they came from the same family.

When it comes to God's family, things like hairstyles, or skin color, or language aren't the things that give away our identity as children of God because God's family is so beautifully expansive and diverse, yet there are identifying markers. In our second reading from Matthew, Jesus gives a good description of traits that make the children of God recognizable to others.

The words Jesus speaks here are familiar to us. It's the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, and one way to hear and

understand these words is like those signs that people sometimes hang in their homes or like the flags they put in their yards that declare to everyone what their family values are. I read one that says, "In this family we do hugs, we do second chances, we do honesty, we do forgiveness, we do laughs, we do real, we do fun, we do family." When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, he was painting a picture of what it looks like to live under his rule and by the principles and values of his kingdom. He was describing a different way of life, and it's the way of life and being that defines and distinguishes those who belong to God's family. Let's listen to what he says.

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he began to speak and taught them, saying:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

In this Sermon, Jesus is describing both how things will be *someday* when there is no longer any opposition to his rule, but he is also describing how life is and can be *now* when people submit to his rule. Since we aren't yet living in the time when he reigns without opposition, when the members of God's family embrace and give themselves to being the people in the world that Jesus describes here

as happy and blessed, they become easy to identify because they're going against the flow. People can look at the children of God and say, "Oh, you're part of that family that values and practices generosity instead of greed. Oh, you're part of that family that practices forgiveness instead of seeking revenge." It may not seem like it to everyone, but to God's sons and daughters who know they are secure in the hands of a loving Father and who trust in God's wisdom, this is a good way to live. It makes sense, but to others the characteristics and the way of life Jesus calls blessed seem like foolishness and weakness. God's children can end up being judged as weird - kind of in the same way that families judge other families who have different values or traditions.

Let's use opening Christmas presents as an example. Some families like to watch as one person at a time opens presents. For other families it's a free for all. If you spend Christmas with a family that opens presents one at a time, and you come from a free for all family, you might spend Christmas morning asking what is *wrong* with this family?

It's not always easy to live in the world as a person who is part of the family that people think is weird because it's a family that resists conforming to the patterns that are considered normal. It can feel lonely or even painful. We might feel the kind of temptation that's common in adolescence- to hide our true identity as children of God because we want to fit in, but it's not *only* the possibility of being considered weird that can make it hard to persevere as Jesus's disciples. That may really be the least of our worries.

It may just be that we struggle sometimes to practice faith and obedience on a daily basis because it requires sacrifice and self-denial, or because we don't immediately see the fruit that comes from faithfulness. Even when we feel confident in our identity as

God's beloved children, and even if we aren't persecuted in the way that some of our brothers and sisters truly experience persecution because of their faith, it can still be hard to live, as Peter says, as "aliens and strangers" in this world, and here is one of the ways that being connected to our spiritual family gives us strength. It's not easy to be uncommon and to live differently, but it helps when you know you're not the only one. It helps to see our brothers and sisters doing the same thing.

It's like the summer I wanted to learn how to dive off the diving board at the pool, but I was too scared to do it. I was standing near the diving board trying to get up the courage to go up the ladder and take the dive when my older sister went around me, climbed up the ladder and just dived off. I had never seen her do it and when she came up out of the water I asked, "have you ever done that before?" She said no, and all of a sudden, I had the courage to try because if *she* could do it, *I* could do it.

Sometimes that's how we get the strength we need to be faithful. We are helped and inspired by the faithful witness of our brothers and sisters. This sanctuary is full of people who can provide that fellowship and encouragement, and on All Saints Day we are reminded that even those who have already passed from this life to life beyond the grave can also be that source of encouragement, and inspiration, and strength.

Some, like the members of our own families and members of this church family who have already gone ahead of us, we knew and we remember them well. We shared life in the world with them, and we got to be witnesses to the lives they lived as faithful servants and followers of Christ. Many of the saints we never knew personally, but we've heard their stories of faithfulness and endurance, and their stories challenge and inspire us to keep believing and living as faithful

followers of Christ. We can all name people in both categories - those you knew personally and those you never knew but you know their stories – people that we know from Scripture, Christian martyrs, preachers and teachers. Let's take a moment to say their names out loud now.

I think about what Hebrews calls the great cloud of witnesses often, and the faithful witness of others is an incredible source of strength and encouragement for me. I *want* to hear the stories of saints who lived and persevered in faith despite enduring seasons of doubt and spiritual darkness. I want to hear the stories of saints who devoted 40 or many more years of their lives pastoring churches, or serving as foreign missionaries. I want to hear the stories of saints who spent a lifetime being faithful to Jesus at the same time that they raised children, and enjoyed friendships, and worked their careers. I want to know the people who are living that way now, and I want to hear the stories of people who lived that way, because it truly does inspire me to keep going when I feel doubtful, or unworthy, or when discipleship feels difficult or monotonous.

I want to hear these stories, and I think we all want to hear these stories, because when we're having a hard time, or we're feeling hopeless or discouraged, we need to be reminded that trusting in Jesus and living for him is worth it. It's worth it for ourselves, and it's worth it for those around us, and one of the ways we know that is because we can *see* the difference that our spiritual family members have made in our lives and in the lives of others. Many of us are believers and part of God's family because our parents taught us about Christ. This church is here because of the people who came before us. Hospitals have been established, the hungry have been fed, people on every continent have been evangelized! Our weird and wonderful family has made a difference in this world, which causes us to celebrate and inspires us to keep going, and for more

encouragement and inspiration we look to God's promises to us in Scripture.

The Scriptures that we've read so far this morning, and the one we're about to read, teach us that the way we live now in the world is important. We live in the world *now* with Jesus as our Lord, but neither we nor the world are yet what we someday will be. We live now in anticipation of a new day that Jesus is bringing and when we all finally arrive at that day together, there will be no doubt that any tears that were shed, and any sacrifices that were made, and any difficult seasons that were endured by the saints for the sake of our Lord Jesus will not have been in vain. Let's listen to our final Scripture reading from Revelation 7.

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!"

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "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.

15 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.
16 They will hunger no more and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat,
17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

This is the vision of where things are going, and of the future that God has planned for all of God's children that endure to the end. Along with the living testimony of the saints, it is the promise that gives us assurance that faithfulness is worth it, and it inspires us to keep moving forward through temptations, or resistance, or doubts, or monotony.

In just a few minutes, we will be invited to come to Jesus's table, and there we are given a little glimpse of the future that Jesus is bringing to us. As we come to the table we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses – both the ones we see sitting here next to us and the ones we can't see with our eyes. We all come together, filled with gratitude for the grace and mercy we have received that binds us to Christ and to each other and makes us one family.

On a day like today, we do miss and we give thanks to God for the saints that have helped us along so far, but at the table we are reminded that our thoughts about them don't need to be backward facing only toward the past. We will be with them again someday, but

also, we are reminded that what they have been for us - teachers, examples, life-changers, inspiration – we can be for others when we keep living as faithful followers of Christ. At Jesus's table, he gives us the grace and the nourishment that enables us to do that. Thanks be to God. Amen.