

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota
November 2, 2014

Matthew 23:1-12
I Thessalonians 2:9-13
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Kids, did you go trick or treating last Friday? What character did you dress up like? Superman? Spiderman? A ghost? A witch?

Halloween, way, way back in history was a time when people thought that terrible creatures came out at night to scare and to hurt people. They thought about the devil doing wicked things. People were very afraid that something terrible might happen to themselves or their families. That they might get hurt. That they might die.

Christian people eventually started to turn this from a scary day of evil to a happy day of good. Christians began to call this night "**All Saints Day Eve**." Christians used **All Saints Day** as a time to remember beloved family and friends who had died and who were now living with God in heaven. Instead of being afraid of evil things, Christians thanked God for beloved people. Christians thanked God for the promise that even when God's people do die, they will go to live with God in a wonderful heaven forever.

Today Halloween is not so scary. It is more of a time for fun with families and friends. It is more of a time for people to be generous with giving away sweet treats. And, as we do in worship, we can use it as a time to thank God for all the people that are a part of our faith family that have gone on ahead of us to live in heaven. And the promise is that when we someday die, they will join Jesus in welcoming us to that wonderful home of God too. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

This week we celebrate **All Saints Day**. We recall and celebrate all of the folks who have been a part of the kingdom of God here on this earth. Each of these has been **both a sinner and a saint**. We are **sinners** because of our failure to love and trust God with our whole hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we are **saints** because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection gifting us with love, forgiveness and an eternal place in God's family. As Christians, we are both sinners and saints at the same time.

From my office window, I have the opportunity to watch the comings and goings of the people of God, these sinner/saints. There are always people doing the work of the Lord at this place. Some are coming here to help on some church project. Some are coming here to share their heart's concern about life struggles. Some are coming here to advocate for someone else who is hurting or in need.

As a pastor in this faith family, I also get to watch some of the comings and goings of the people of God out and around town. God's people are doing the work of the Lord. Some are sending a card. Some are offering up a prayer. Some are delivering a hotdish. Some are faithfully doing their work at their place of employment.

For generations, for hundreds of years, the people of God have walked shoulder to shoulder with each other and with Jesus to be the hands and feet of God. We read about them in the scriptures. We hear about them in the history books. We have known some of them in our own lives.

I've been blessed to watch the lives and passing of some beautiful children of God. I'm going to walk through a little list of people that I am thankful for. While I reminisce, please use the memorial card you received in the bulletin to jot down the names of some of your own special folks.

- At **Bethlehem Lutheran in Albion**, it was **Jennie Nelson**. During the week she served God as a high school librarian and teacher. In the summer she served God by making sure that Vacation Bible School happened...

- At **Faith in Culver**, it was **Adolph Johnson**. During the week he served God as a farmer. On the weekends he ushered, and in the summer he mowed and cared for the church cemetery.
- At **Faith in Duluth**, it was **Jurgen Fuhr**. During the week he served as an accountant. He was always on the church council. And every year he and his wife, **Myrna**, attended the Northern Minnesota District Convention to represent our church.
- At **Hosanna in St. Paul**, it was **Mel Espeseth**. During the week he was a business man. Every summer for over 40 years he was the barker at Hosanna's state fair food booth. He would stand out on the street and passionately invite people in to eat.
- At **Immanuel in Wadena**, it was **Tim Schmidt**. He was the doctor who gave free medical care to our first born, Leah, who suffered from seizures when she was born. We already owed tens of thousands of dollars for her 14 days in prenatal intensive care and he figured caring for our infant would be a good mission for him.
- At **Our Saviors in Outing**, it was **Roy and Millie Stohl**. They were retired military. They are the ones who recruited, organized and led 50 other folks in building the parsonage for that congregation's first resident pastor.
- At **Littlefork Lutheran in Littlefork**, it was **Marvin Hoff**. During the week he served the Lord as a logger. On the weekends and at every funeral, he served the Lord as the one who rang the church bell and welcomed everyone who came through the door. But Marvin also served the Lord as a loving, caring, helping person every day of his life. The same is true of all of the others that I have mentioned so far.
- At **Lord of Life Lutheran in Baxter**, it was **Paul Hansen**. Before his medical retirement, he worked for a government program that helped low income people to get housing. He helped start Lord of Life Lutheran and he tried to attend every funeral so that there would be at least one church member other than the pastor there to support the family. Paul lived his days trying to serve God and to love the neighbor.

It was my privilege and blessing to know all of these people who have since died and gone on to the kingdom of heaven. And I am blessed to know hundreds more who are servants of God in their everyday lives right now.

In our Gospel lesson from **Matthew**, Jesus is heard criticizing the leaders of God's ancient Jewish people. Jesus accused them of lording it over the common people. He said that they were putting more burdens on the backs of folks who were already carrying too much. Jesus said they were parading around like big shots looking for praise and attention. Jesus said that they should be **serving** the people. Jesus said, "**The greatest among you will be your servant.**"

Jesus spoke these words to his **Jewish audience**. Thirty or forty years later, the Gospel writer, Matthew offered these words of correction to the leaders of the **Christian church**. Maybe these words are addressed to us folks here at **First Lutheran** in Aitkin 2,000 years later as well... "**Don't lord it over and place more burdens on the people of this community. Serve and lift burdens from the backs of the people in Aitkin.**"

Christians are not volunteers. We are **servants** of God, neighbor and creation. The world uses the word "**volunteer**" to refer to someone who commits some time, money or effort to help with some specific project. "**Will you volunteer to read to the kindergarten class at Rippleside Elementary School?**" Volunteers are great. Servants are better.

Being a "**servant**" means **belonging to God** through our baptism and faith. It means **serving God** through our neighbor and the creation. It is **not a one-shot deal**. It is a **lifestyle**. It is trying to live and serve like Jesus. The friends that I mentioned earlier were serving God not just by doing stuff around the church. They were serving God everyday and everywhere by how they treated others, cared for their homes, and cared for the world around them.

The Apostle Paul, in our lesson from 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, put it this way. "... **lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**" I think Paul is saying, "**God gave you life, adopted you into God's family, loves and cares for you every day, therefore live thankfully and compassionately every day.**"

Living a servant lifestyle **isn't a curse**. **It is a gift and blessing** from God for the person who lives it and for the person who is touched by it. When you go out of your way to serve someone, they are blessed and so are you.

I attended the funeral for a friend a couple of weeks ago. Prior to the service his family ran a video showing snapshots of this man's whole lifespan – significant events, family gatherings, fun, hard work, celebrations... These videos are a wonderful addition to funeral celebrations. Everyone who attends the funeral gets at least a few glimpses of the deceased person's whole life. On our last day, **what do we want them to see when they watch the video of our lives?**

Jesus said, "**The greatest among you will be your servant.**" Paul said, "**Lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.**" Have you thought of some of the sinner/saints that have somehow made a difference in your life and faith? Write their names down on your little card as a way of thanking God for them.

And the whole people of God today also join in thanking God for you, dear sister and brother in Christ, dear fellow sinner/saint. Thanks be to God. Amen.