

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY | NOVEMBER 1, 2020

REVELATION 7:9-17 | PSALM 34:1-12, 22 | 1 JOHN 3:1-3 | MATHEW 5:1-12

One of my endless struggles is finding greeting cards to use for church events. Christian greeting cards exist, they often have their own section in the greeting card aisle, but you get the feeling they weren't made with mainline Protestants in mind. There are the greeting cards for baptisms that are gender specific for no apparent reason. There are the first communion cards that read, "Congratulations on your big achievement!" and have a pocket for money. And there are the cards with downmarket Bible translations that go out of their way to insert extra masculine pronouns. *For he so loved his world that he gave his only begotten son so that he...* Sometimes the Christian cards don't seem all that different from the secular ones except for the presence of one word: blessed. Whether it is a birthday, a funeral, a new home, or a graduation, you are, the cards tell us, blessed.

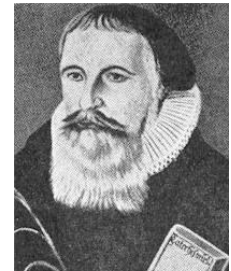
When we say that we're blessed, we usually mean that something good has happened to us. A new job, a new child, or a new relationship might be a blessing. Or a disappointing event may be a blessing in disguise. We might have a hard time defining exactly what a blessing is, but it's definitely something positive.

The word "blessed" has deep theological significance. It's used hundreds of times in scripture. God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it. God blessed Abraham to be a blessing. The psalmist blesses the Lord. Jeremiah blesses those who trust God. St. Paul says that God blessed the patriarchs. And, of course, in today's gospel reading Jesus declares that the poor in spirit, meek, and merciful are blessed. The idea of blessing isn't something that only comes up once or twice. It shows up all over the place.

And you can already see a little bit of tension here. The way the editors of Genesis talk about blessing is sort of different than the way the editors at, say, Hallmark do. Thankfully, All Saints Sunday gives us a good way to think about blessing. Because we can't really understand what it means to be blessed without understanding why we have a whole day dedicated to the saints.

One saint who might help us think about what it means to be blessed is Martin Rinkart. Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor in Eilenburg, Saxony in the early seventeenth century. Rinkart lived through two traumatizing events. The first was the Thirty Years War, a conflict between Catholics and Protestants that raged across central Europe and killed around eight million people between the battles and the resulting famines. The walled city Rinkart lived in became crowded with people fleeing the ravages of war, which worsened the second traumatic event Rinkart lived through: a plague.

Rinkart and the city's other clergy were responsible for providing Christian burials for the bodies piling up in the streets. But the plague quickly killed the other clergy in the town, and Rinkart was left to do the work by himself. When the plague hit his own home, it killed his wife. And after Rinkart himself recovered, he went back to work, standing outside the walls of the city, offering burial rites for between forty and fifty people a day. When he wasn't burying people, he spent most of his time trying to help people find enough to eat. Rinkart died in 1649, one year after the war came to an end and after the plague had killed eight thousand of his neighbors. When it was all over, Rinkart had buried close to five thousand people. You can't help but wonder if he died of sheer exhaustion.



RINKART

Why do we tell the stories of people like Rinkart on All Saints Day? After all, Rinkart might have been an honorable person, but he's not Jesus. So what's the point of focusing on people like

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him? To start with, one thing people like Rinkart do is give us perspective. We are often wont to thinking that our experiences are so impossibly unique that no one could ever understand what we are going through. But people like Rinkart remind us that sometimes events appear to be novel not because they are unique, but because we don't think beyond our own experience of the world. When we find ourselves in a challenging situation, they remind us that the body of Christ has been here before.

Another thing people like Rinkart do is give us an example. Surrounded by war and plague, Rinkart was faithful in a way that appears underwhelming at first glance. He didn't try to prove his devotion to God by taking stupid risks or pumping up his own ego by making himself seem more important than he was. He did very simple things. Feed the living. Bury the dead. Repeat as needed. The saints remind us that we are more likely to find heroes among the quiet and diligent than the boisterous and triumphant.

But neither one of these quite answers our question. After all, it's self-evident that there is lots to be learned from history, and Christians certainly don't have a monopoly on good examples. So what is the role of saints in the church?

The short answer to that is that the saints make it possible to have faith in God. Their lives provide evidence. Not evidence that God exists. But evidence that a life spent following Jesus and being formed by the Holy Spirit is worth pursuing. That it makes the world more intelligible. That it makes other people more lovable. That it makes ourselves more forgivable. The saints invite us to come close to Jesus and to stay there even when things become difficult.

This idea is the subtext in today's gospel reading, a selection from the sermon on the mount. Jesus was not the only Jewish teacher offering sermons on the mount. There were plenty of others. And in Jesus's world it was customary that once your teacher died, all the disciples went off and found some other rabbi they liked well enough. Peter would go to Rabbi Alef. John would go to Rabbi Bet. Andrew would go to Rabbi Gimel. So on and so forth.

What was unusual about the first followers of Jesus is that they never moved on to anyone else. They stayed with Jesus. They remained disciples. And instead of disbanding and falling apart, that community grew. It grew across borders. It grew across prejudices. It grew across generations. And it grew not because these early believers were well off or desirable or comfortable or happy or blessed in the Hallmark way of talking about it. That community grew because the lives of the saints had integrity. They made it possible to believe in God. They made it possible to stay.

To put it in other words, our faith always comes to us through others. This is just sort of obvious on some level. You are here today because of other people. Maybe a family member or a friend or a pastor or a teacher or camp counselor or social worker or a coach or whatever. There is someone who has made the faith intelligible, understandable, credible to you. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that creates a space for us to be in the presence of God.

That's what the blessing is. It's not a thing. It's not a material good. It's not a worldly possession. The blessing is the knowledge that there is nowhere else for you to be. The blessing is being invited to stay here, to learn to listen to God, to become aware of God's working on us. Whenever we gather together and speak the words of Jesus to the one he called the Father, there is nowhere else for us to be, nothing else for us to do, nothing else for us to say. We are, with all the saints, at rest. We are, to use Jesus's own word, blessed.

And once you understand that, the witness of people like Rinkart start to make a little more sense. Rinkart was someone who lived amidst the wastes of our wraths and sorrows. After all, one morning, Rinkart commended his wife to the mercy of God and then did the same for forty of his neighbors. And yet, around that same time, amidst a war and a plague and a famine, he wrote these words from the hymn we are about to sing. "Now thank we all our God / with heart and hands and

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voices, / who wondrous things has done, / in whom his world rejoices; / who from our mothers' arms / has blessed us on our way / with countless gifts of love, / and still is ours today.”

It's the saints of God who make faith in God credible, who make the goodness of others palpable, and who make staying with Jesus imaginable. Thanks be to God for all those who grow in faith, shine in light, and, as Rinkart put it, “bless us on our way.”

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor