

Title: “Saints by Grace”

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1 John 3:1-2

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Service Readings: Rev. 7:9–17, 1 John 3:1–3, Matt. 5:1–12

On All Saints’ Day we rejoice that sainthood is bestowed on us by God’s grace, alone – through the blood of the Lamb. For those who have gone before us, they now see what we still cling to in faith; and what they see, we too shall see when Christ appears.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

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. ² 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. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

You’ve seen those heaven/hell billboard signs on the side of the road? You know, those plain white ones with the black and red letters that ask, “If you died today, where would you go?” They usually provide a scripture reference, but not the verse or even any real context. Nothing more than a direct question. I imagine the goal is to wake you up, shake you up, and maybe prompt you to look for a place to pull over and repent. Maybe even to pause on your earthly journey for just a moment to ensure that your *real* journey, the one that *really* matters, is heading in the right direction. I don’t know about you, but for me these signs seem like a spiritual trap, especially because just a short distance later there is usually a follow-up one that reads: “You’d better figure it out before it’s too late!”

In our Epistle today, John erects his own billboard for us to read as we travel down this highway of our life, so to speak. But his message is completely different. Instead of provoking fear, he instills a sense of wonder. John writes, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God – and so we are.” Do you see how he doesn’t start from a place of judgement but of grace? He isn’t asking you where you will go when you die. He’s announcing who you *already are* in Christ: a saint by grace – someone who has *already* died and risen with Jesus; someone who *already* belongs to the Father. And his follow-up sign is not a command to choose but a reminder of what has *already been* given: “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” If you were not a Christian, which sign would be more appealing to you? The goal of both are the same: your salvation, but the approach between the two couldn’t be more opposite.

“Everyone who hopes in Jesus,” is what John writes. It is an invitation. And one that is rooted in a kind of love that is other-worldly. That’s what John is saying. He’s pointing out the love of the Father is a love that exists nowhere else, from no one else. A love that is foreign to any love we have experienced.

John’s sign is not a call to act, but an invitation to responded to the Father’s love. A church father once said of this verse: “He became what we are, that He might make us what He is.” Athanasius saw this verse as fulfilled in the incarnation: the Father’s love manifest in sending his son into creation, in our nature, so that we might share his sonship. This is a love that is not abstract but real; a love that is *embodied* in the Son, himself, given for us. And in baptism this loves becomes ours, personally. And not in some abstract way but in

a sacramental, real way – through water, Word, and Spirit. Oh what love the Father has given to us, Jesus, his son, that calls us, justifies us, glorifies us, and adopts us.

But even as we confess this astonishing love of the Father that has made us his children, our hearts sometimes tremble. We remember our loved ones who have gone before us whose faith may not have been visible while they were here and we wonder: Were they good enough? Was their faith strong enough? Are they *really* with the Lord? And maybe, if we are being honest with ourselves, that question turns inward. Will I make it? Will my faith hold when my end comes?

It's in moments like these that the world's billboards start to replace John's. Fear begins to crowd out wonder. Grace gives way to uncertainty. We begin to imagine that salvation depends on the quality of our faith rather than the object of it, that it rests on how tightly we can hold on to Jesus, rather than how securely He holds on to us.

But this is exactly where John offers us assurance. He reminds us that what defines a saint is not the strength of faith, but the one in whom that faith rests. See what kind of love the Father has given to us. That love is Jesus, himself. It is a love that comes from heaven, through the cross, descends into the grave, and now flows through the baptismal waters to make sinners into saints. It begins with the Father, is accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit. There is nothing left for us to add. Even the faith that clings to Christ is itself a gift to us. You see, it is not about human achievement, it is about the divine gift. We are saints by grace alone.

And we can take comfort in knowing that those who have gone before us already see what we hope for. And this, too is a gift from the Father, a gift that we can take comfort in. The same water and Word that claimed them as saints keeps them safe in Christ, and it keeps you united with them until the day you see what they now see.

You are God's child.
You are his saint, by grace.

Please pray with me.
By grace! On this I'll rest when dying;
In Jesus' promise I rejoice
For though I know my heart's condition,
I also know my Savior's voice
My heart is glad, all grief has flown
Since I am saved by grace alone.
Amen.