

21 Pentecost 2003 All Saints
"The Pleasure of God and His People"
The Rev. Thomas W. Simmons IV

Happy All Saints Day. This is one of the great feast days of the Christian year. That's why I'm wearing white and we are baptizing today. Now the calendar is full of saint's days to be remembered and observed. But on this day, we celebrate them all, from the great men of God in ancient Israel to the recently beatified Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

This is "the communion of saints" on earth and heaven with whom we share our faith and love for God. We also share our worship with them when "we lift up our hearts" and join "angels, archangels and *all the company of heaven*" in offering God our greatest praise.

We celebrate the saints because God does. That's what our Psalm declares, "The Lord takes pleasure in his people." He takes pleasure in us. *Pleasure*. Most folks probably think of God in more emotionally abstract terms, as somehow "above" pleasure. Pleasure is so *sensual*. But there it is, the Psalmist delights in how we give pleasure to God.

Now that's a great way to define our lives as Christians. It's giving pleasure to God. I think **we give God pleasure by finding our pleasure in him**. The first question in the Presbyterian Catechism makes this clear. It asks, "What is the chief end of man?" Any former Presbyterians remember the answer? "To glorify God and *enjoy him* forever." Our chief end, our highest calling, our ultimate goal, our loftiest aspiration, our mission statement in life is to glorify God *by enjoying him*. That's what saints do.

Think of it as Christian Hedonism. It's the enjoyment of the deepest pleasure and it doesn't run out and there's no law of diminishing returns. It's something all the saints have in common. Though they come from all different times and places, and in all shapes, stripes and sizes THEY ALL passionately love God and find their greatest enjoyment him.

We see that in our lesson from Revelation: the saints in the liturgy of heaven giving God everything because they love him so much. "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" **You see they want God to have it all, because he is worthy.** That's their greatest joy and pleasure.

So, the Christian life, the life of the Saints, is finding our pleasure in God, loving him with all our heart. So, how are we doing? Who do you love? What gives you pleasure? Is it God? Make a mental list of the things that give you the most pleasure on any give day, week, month of the year. Does God make the list?

I think the root of our problems in life is **we love and get our pleasure and identity and direction in life from so many things OTHER than God.** Don't get me wrong. A lot of it is good, important, legitimate stuff. But our dysfunction is that these things are more real and compelling to us than God is. We give them higher priority in our lives. It's called idolatry and we all do it.

It's extremely important that each and every one of us discover our own personal idols. And a great way to do it is to **follow the money.** And this being Stewardship Sunday we get a unique opportunity to reflect on that part of our lives, as each one of us makes our pledge for the coming year.

We invest our lives, our labors, our time and money in what we love and consider most important. **Your time and money follow your heart.** So as you think about what you love and find pleasure in most in life, ask yourself what you're investing in. It's a handy indicator that helps you assign financial value to your relationship with God. Just follow the money and you'll see what you love most.

And if it ain't God, that's a problem. It's just not acceptable. It's got to change. And All Saints is a good opportunity to begin to do that. As with all addictions the first step to wholeness is to admit our problem. **"I love "things" more than I love God."** That's the first step to sainthood. Jesus described it in our Gospel lesson this morning: "blessed are the poor in spirit."

This is the first Beatitude in our Gospel reading this morning. In those eight beatitudes we see **an eight-step stairway to heaven.** These are the steps trod by all saints and they show for us how to love God more than anything.

The first step is being poor in spirit. That means acknowledging our spiritual poverty. God is God and nothing else can compare and yet we are promiscuous in our love for things other than God.

People don't realize that, like a beggar, we are **UTTERLY** dependent on God for whatever spiritual life we have. Do you realize that? We count on God for *everything*, including "our daily bread." We are weak and wayward and we need God's help. These are the facts...*acknowledging* them is being poor in spirit.

When we realize our poverty **the natural next step is to mourn**, because we aren't what we should be. We aspire to something we seem unable to attain. Every week we bring this feeling to God when "we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."

This kind of contrition brings us to **the next step: meekness**, or humility. It is hard to be arrogant or belligerent or judgmental when you know your own sinfulness and total reliance on God's mercy.

But meekness sounds bad doesn't it? People associate it with weakness or being a passive person. That's not it at all. I see it instead as a matter of...*enlightenment*, of right understanding. As Dirty Harry said, "A man's just got to know his limitations." Do you know yours? Do you accept them? That knowledge gives us humility and meekness and true wisdom.

And once we taste this wisdom, we want more, we "**hunger and thirst for righteousness**." Our priorities change. Instead of yearning for the "things" we make into idols more and more we desire to please God and in all our pleasures to find pleasure in God.

That's what we pray for at the end of our confession of sin we conclude the prayer praying that "we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your name..." **Do you see the transformation taking place?** We now want what God wants and love what God loves. This is the life of the saints, asking God to help us in our spiritual poverty, desiring to please him and finding pleasure in him above all else.

And we're only on the fourth step! I want to keep this thing short and there is so much more that could be said, maybe in another sermon. I'll assign some homework. What I want you to do is take your scripture insert home with you today and before going to bed tonight give God 20 minutes of prayerful reflection to walk those next steps with Jesus.

We only touched on four of them this morning. Take time tonight to walk through all of them. And do the same thing tomorrow and the next day. **Memorize the Beatitudes and allow them to shape your life and character.** When you do, you'll discover - or rediscover - the love and pleasure with God that he so desires to share with you.

Let us pray.

Almighty and most lovely Lord, who is worthy to receive glory and honor and praise; grant us hearts to give you what you deserve, highest place in all things. And because we are weak and wayward, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills that we may be wholly yours, through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.