

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

All Saints' Sunday

November 2, 2014

Text: I John 3:1–3

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church...” This is our great confession about the undissolvable unity of Christ's holy Church. No matter how many divisions, denominations, and schisms arise within the visible Church on earth, there is only one Church united under the Lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church is the mystical body we mentioned in prayer during this morning's collect.

The juxtaposition of Reformation Sunday and All Saints' Sunday provides us with a beautiful opportunity to ponder the Church in her mystical unity and transcendent glory; a glorious unity bestowed upon her through the Lord Jesus. Last Sunday, we considered the Church's life on this side of eternity. During this time, the Church struggles mightily and contends fiercely as the Church militant.

Christ's militant Church is surrounded by the enemies of Satan and death and a world hostile to the rule and reign of the Lord Jesus. The apostle Paul grimly declares that everyone who lives godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution as evil people and imposters go from bad to worse (II Timothy 3:12). James bluntly says that friendship with the world and its evil ways makes one an enemy with God (James 4:4). Peter describes the devil as a prowling and roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (I Peter 5:8). These passages of Scripture, and there are many more, describe the external struggles the Church must endure; struggles and temptations that come from outside the Church.

But how could we not recognize the internal struggles of the Church. The apostle Jude forcefully admonishes his Christian readers earnestly “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). False teachers so easily creep into the Church and corrupt the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Paul declares that anyone who preaches a different Gospel than Christ crucified and resurrected for the justification and salvation of sinners, whether they be an apostle or even an angel, will be eternally condemned (Galatians 1:8–9). And what of our daily, personal struggle with sin and disobedience to God's Word and will? Romans 6 says that through Holy

Baptism we have died with Christ and have risen to newness of life in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Paul almost immediately admonishes his Christians to not let sinful passions reign within their bodies. Do not yield yourselves as instruments of evil but rather instruments of holiness and purity.

No matter how you look at it, the warfare the Church and her members endures is intense and constant. Assaults from external enemies, destructive heresies from within, and the incessant battle with our inherent sinful nature. Reformation Sunday reminds us, in one way or another, that we need a mighty fortress of protection found only in the Lord Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection for the sins of the world are the only absolute means of grace and victory for the Church.

But what of today? All Saints' Sunday. Here we see the Church described differently, as the Church triumphant. The Church rests from her labors and enjoys the glory of her reward in Jesus. The apostle John, in Revelation 7, saw the Church triumphant gathered around God's throne and before the Lamb. She is clothed in white robes of holiness and virtue. All the while she waves palm branches triumphantly and joyously sings the praises of God and Jesus, the Lamb of God the Father who takes away the sins of the world. No longer shall she hunger and thirst. No longer shall the scorching heat of this fallen world oppress God's holy Church. All tears and sorrows are forever wiped away by the loving hands of God. She has come out of the great tribulation as victors over all enemies, over all opposition.

Christ has prepared the Church's holy mansions. Every room is fully furnished and prepared (John 14). The bridal feast of the best foods and the choicest wine is ready (Isaiah 25). All eternity provides the timeframe for this festive triumph. And this present creation will never do. A new heavens and a new earth will be the locale of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21). When Jesus speaks of the kingdom prepared for His faithful, forgiven people, this is what He is referring to. You see, heaven and earth cannot contain the joy and triumph Christ's blessed Church. Everything that oppressed God's holy people, whether from within or from without, falls in utter defeat before Christ's Church. This is the Church triumphant.

In some detail now I have described the Church triumphant and the Church militant. Both images are rooted richly and deeply in Holy Scripture. But did I not begin this sermon with the Nicene Creed declaring that there is one holy Christian and apostolic Church? So which is it? One or two?

The answer is that they are both one Church. One mystical body united together in the Lord Jesus Christ. You saints of God gathered here this morning are the Church militant in this place. The Lord Jesus calls you to follow Him though the warfare and the struggle remains fierce. But be of good cheer, says Jesus, He has overcome the world with its evil devices.

And yet you also are members of the Church triumphant through your most, holy precious faith in the Jesus. The apostle John, in today's epistle reading, says twice that you are children of God now. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (There's the first time!) The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we God's children now... (there's the second time!) You are God's holy, redeemed, victorious, and beloved children now.

Sometimes I get the sense that Christians think they'll be God's children in heaven, as if they weren't His children now. Banish that thought forever. You are God's children now for you are baptized into Jesus, redeemed by His death and resurrection, cleansed by His holy, precious blood, and made beautiful temples of God's presence through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is for these reasons, among many others, that I make a deliberate point of calling you saints of God. For that is what you are: saints of God in Christ Jesus now and forever. You are members of His holy bride, the Church.

Please return back to I John 3:2, "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." We do not yet see or experience in everyday life the glory of our final victory. Though we possess it by faith – all of God's promises are currently yours through faith in Christ Jesus – we will not experience it until Jesus comes again in glory on the Last Day. And when He comes, we will no longer live by faith but by the fulfilled reality of being redeemed in the likeness and glory and victory and triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ. We shall see Jesus as He is and we shall be like Him! You are the church triumphant in this place on this side of eternity.

The coming of Jesus on the Last Day will reveal what is already true. Redeemed saints clothed in Christ's holiness and glory. That's you, dear saints of God.

But maybe the day to day warfare and struggle of living the Christian life is clouding your ability to see yourself as pure, saints of God. Look at vs. 3, "And everyone who thus hopes in him (i.e., Jesus) purifies himself as he (i.e., Jesus) is pure." Already you

possess the purity of Jesus. In other words, you are saints of God. And remember what Jesus said in the Beatitudes, today's gospel reading. Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Your ultimate end, your destiny, is to see God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in all His glory. For you too are glorified in the love and grace of Jesus, the Father's beloved Son.

The Bible does make a distinction in its descriptions of the Church: the Church militant and the Church triumphant. But the Bible does not make a separation. There is only one holy Christian and apostolic Church. And it is my joy and privilege to behold and to serve that glorious Church manifested in this place, in this time. For in Christ Jesus you are triumphant and exalted to the very throne of God. Blessed are you indeed, dear saints of God.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.