

All Saints Day – 2023

Revelation 7:2-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Privilege; people of my generation grew up with the word. We grew up with the idea, the awareness that such a thing exists – a privilege. By way of example, it was a privilege for me to take my parents' car to go skiing three hours away at Mt. Bachelor. It wasn't my car. I didn't purchase it, didn't make insurance payments, heck... I didn't even buy the gas. My parents bestowed on me, at times a very unworthy recipient, the privileges that made my life joyful. Privileges are, by definition, things that can be taken away. I had to earn certain privileges, and by my ill behavior I would regularly have those privileges taken away. Some privileges automatically came to me just by being a member of my family.

Dr. Otto Octavius is the villain in the movie *Spiderman II*, a personal favorite. One of his experiments goes terribly wrong and he is transformed into Doctor Octopus, Doc Ock for short – a tentacled menace to New York City. At the end of the movie, Doc Ock is engaged in a fusion experiment that threatens the world. Peter Parker, Spiderman, is there to stop it. After a big-time fight, Spiderman takes off his mask and Peter Parker speaks to Dr. Octavius, the good man buried beneath the villain. “You once spoke to me about intelligence; that it was a gift to be used for the good of mankind.” Octavius remembers his own words, the veracity of them, he nods and says: “A privilege.” Octavius then gives up his nightmare plans and sacrifices his life to save New York City.

Privilege; somehow it has become a dirty word in our culture. I don't get it. Everything is now a right; nothing is a privilege. Because of this, gratitude at being given something you didn't deserve diminishes, effort to maintain the gift is reduced and our corporate character suffers. Privileged people, folks who know the value of what they have been given, respond with humility. Do you have gifts that are to be treasured? The Lord God has given you life, and He supports that gift. The resources of creation are showered upon you and you are highly favored. Do you treasure your life? How does it show? There is one superlative gift that elevates you to the highest places – not above other folks, but a gift that draws you near to God. What is that gift? You are holy. That is a privilege.

Holy – God has made you like Him. Almighty God has shared with you the immeasurable beauty of His divine life. There is nothing you could do to attain this privilege, this standing before God. Blessedness refers to the condition of an individual who has been favorably accepted by God and has received His divine approval. Blessedness; this exquisite reality has come cascading upon you, enriching your life, preparing you for heaven, benefiting those around you, bringing joy and satisfaction where prior to this gift there was only self, and worldly squalor and carnal indulgence. Holy – God has made you like Him. You are privileged with this gift, this blessedness. All that is good, all that is lasting and true and virtuous and heavenly – it has been given to you. Those things reside not in some abstract philosophical dimension; those things reside in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Holy One whose life you share – that's what makes you blessed.

At the very beginning of His ministry, when the joy of His service to humanity was first unleashed, what did He talk about, what reality filled His mind? Your blessedness, your participation in His life, your union with Him.

He sees a crowd not unlike this assembly gathered here – He ascends a mountain in order to be heard and He pours forth a sermon that describes how privileged you are, how privileged He wills you to be. Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted – that is all Him. First of all, these beatitudes refer to Him. Jesus Himself is the blessed One (Romans 9:5). And He has come to share His life. You are a saint. You are holy. You are blessed. It is a gift worth protecting.

You know what it is to protect an asset. We shield our children, we lock our homes, we have car alarms, we keep track of our purse, our wallet. Sadly, there are those out there who would steal from us, even our identities. The world is profane and would have you dance to its unholy tune. Holiness is a reality that is held in very low regard by the culture around us and that puts you at risk. Sadly, Christians often don't take this risk seriously. Too often we behave as though God's gift of His holiness is a right, a standing we will keep in perpetuity regardless of how little we esteem His gift. To be sure, holiness is your identity, and yet you profane your own identity by following the ways of the world. Eat, drink, and be merry – that is the faithless mantra of those who live in darkness. We are called to self-restraint. We are called to temperance and self-denial not as a rigid religious exercise but because we are privileged, because we share in Christ's life and the holiness we have received is worth protecting. Because we live in the light we govern our lives according to God's ways, not according to the world's ways. The Giver has said to you: Be holy, for I am holy (that is both a declarative promise and a command).

You have been set apart for God – that is what holy means. You belong to Him; that, completely by itself, is a privilege. In love He sent His Son to pull you out of the quagmire of sin and death. Self, emptiness, the base instincts of our fallen nature, the endlessly repetitive sins that plague us – He came to bear that, to suffer for it, to die for it. Your sins... placed on Him. Your lack of regard for others, your self-serving indulgence, He came to take it. Jesus' holy flesh was pierced and His holy blood flowed. God accomplished the impossible by saving sinners from just condemnation without violating His own righteousness and integrity. Saved; you have been saved. And now you are holy. His blood washed you; His Spirit animates you; His death and resurrection are anchored in your soul. Forgiven and beautiful; radiant and holy – you are a saint, you are set apart for God – you are privileged.

In a little while, during the Prayer of the church, we will read the names of those in our beloved congregation who have died in the faith in the last year. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1-2). That is what the Scripture says; a great multitude of believers who have been transferred from the church militant to the church triumphant. They have kept the faith; they have finished the race. They have the ultimate privilege – they are in heaven. It is a gift. It is an unparalleled gift to have Christ the King say to us: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." You are a saint and one day you will see the Master's face and He will say those words to you. You have

washed your robe and made it white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14). You, even now, are part of the great multitude of believers who worships the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but one day you will stand before His mighty throne and He will guide you to springs of living water. You are privileged! Wonderfully, beautifully, magnificently privileged.

So let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run the race marked out for us. We have been set apart by God. We have been set apart for God. He has made us holy and holy is what we will be. Blessed are you, the saints of Christ the King, for you are beautifully ensconced in the family of our Father. Rejoice and be glad, you are privileged, you are holy, you are blessed.