

6-23-19 All Saints Day

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

Most of you have heard me say in past homilies that we are a blessed people, a blessed parish. I'm all always grateful for this. God has granted this parish to survive and to thrive in some difficult times as well as some wonderful times.

And as I usually say after the great feast of the church, I am so appreciative of our choir. They do so much. They work so hard to make our worship reach levels of beauty and majesty that simply would not be possible without them. It's so beyond our comprehension how truly, how truly blessed we are. It should be a cause of joy and thankfulness.

When we slow down and contemplate the greatness of our God, the greatness of our God is far surpasses our finite understanding. This same immeasurable God loves us. He loves us. I read somewhere many years ago that, "Where there is truth and love there is Christ." It's our great honor and privilege and even our responsibility to have called Christ our Lord and our God. We confess Him with our words, and with our deeds, with humility, awe, and love.

Today's gospel, we have the Lord proclaiming that whoever confesses Him before men, He will confess them before his Father who is in heaven. Countless men and women throughout the ages, millions and millions have dared to confess Christ even to the point of giving up their own lives to maintain that confession.

Today is the Sunday of all the saints. The day that we commemorate and remember those saints, the millions of saints throughout the century, all the saints, not just the great saints that many of us are somewhat familiar with, but all saints of all generations. This is a day that we commemorate them, the millions of men and women and children throughout the centuries who dedicated themselves to Christ, who love Christ, who are obedient to Christ, whose desire in life is Christ, the countless unnamed martyrs and confessors.

And of course, we know many of those lives that were recorded and we read about them and commemorate them specifically. We all should commemorate those martyrs and confessors who suffered greatly for the faith, and those who lived a peaceful life, the faithful ones who lived holy lives, love their neighbors, shared themselves, their love, their health, their possessions, expecting nothing in return looking only to Christ as their heavily benefactor.

We heard in today's gospel from Matthew 10 verse 32. The Lord says, "Therefore, everyone who confesses me before men, I will confess him before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will deny him before my Father who is in heaven."

The Lord is very clear. It's not ambiguous. The Lord is very clear. He is giving back to us exactly what we have chosen to give to Him. If we confess Him with love, a pure heart, humbleness as our Lord and our God, He promises to confess us before his Father, but if we deny Him before men, He will deny us before his Father in heaven.

It's amazing though when you think about it. It's amazing that He loves us so much that He never violates our freedom. Think about that. He never violates our freedom. He doesn't force

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us to be obedient to Him. He doesn't force us to love Him. He doesn't force us to confess Him. He never violates our freedom. We are free to confess Him as wise and blessed people have done throughout all the generations, but we are also free to deny Him as many foolish, foolish people have done.

What is the reward for confessing Christ? What is the outcome of doing what is right? What did the Lord promise to those who follow Him, who were obedient to Him, who confess Him? He said He will confess us before his heavenly Father. It's not even a fair exchange when you think about it. It's not a fair exchange at all. It's so heavily weighted in our favor. We should be thankful for that. It's so heavily weighted in our favor.

God does not need anything. He is not deficient or lacking. He needs nothing from us. He is all power, all wisdom, all knowledge, but He also has infinite love. And love demands compassion, and mercy, and forgiveness. It is His love, compassion, and mercy that is expressed in His confessing us to his Father. In confessing us to the Father, our names are being written in the Book of Life. Our place is being established in the mansions of paradise.

What can we offer to God that He needs that He is deficient in? Nothing, nothing at all. What does God offer us? Everything, everything, eternal Life, love, mercy, perfection, a never ending perfection. He offers us paradise where there is no pain, sorrow, heartache, struggle, illness, jealousy, gossip, hatred, war, famine, all of the rest. He offers us an eternal bliss, an eternal bliss that mind is not even able to contemplate. It's beyond our imagination. It's beyond everything that we can think of, and it's all ours. It's all ours. We should be thankful for this if we just confess Him with a pure heart.

This of course necessitates the question, what does it mean to confess Him? Is it just the words that we say, I confess Jesus Christ as my Lord and my God, is that enough? Well, it's certainly a good start. Well, what about all those people that we read about in the final judgment? Matthew 7, the Lord is speaking, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? And in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' That I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Depart from me you workers of iniquity."

It's hard to even contemplate that, to even wrap your head around that. They're doing these things that seems so great, so righteous, and then He says, "Depart from me you the work iniquity. I never knew," so we see that it's more than just words. It's also deeds. It's the deeds that get proof... that give proof to the words. Excuse me.

Consider the scriptures from James chapter 2 verse 20. "You foolish person. Do you want evidence that faith without works is useless? Was not our father, Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. It's important to know that to confess Christ is often to follow Christ, to imitate Christ, to add action to what we say.

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The words of confessing Christ are important. Those words are given legitimacy by our deeds. And even the words and deeds to be acceptable must come from good intentions with the right motives, from a pure heart, or at least a desire for a pure heart, the struggle to obtain a pure heart, and humility, and love. We have to have the courage to honestly scrutinize ourselves, to look at ourselves, the things we say, the things we do, even the things we think about.

In Proverbs 21 it says, "Every man's ways seem right in his own eyes. Every man's ways seem right in his own eyes. But God weighs his motives, his heart." To confess Christ, we see there are three essential ingredients. We must confess Him with our mouth, and that's good. We prove these words true by our deeds of love, mercy, kindness, generosity and so on. We do these deeds from a heart with humility, and good intentions, and love.

Looking at the next verse in today's gospel, there is the terrifying reality, depending on which side you have chosen, that God gives us what we have chosen for ourselves. Verse 33, "But whoever denies me before men, I will also be denied before my Father who is in heaven." We must be very careful. Brothers and sisters, we must be very careful. Everything matters. Every day of our life matters. Every word that we say matters. Every thought that we allow to linger in our mind matters. Every action that we take matters.

It reminds me of basketball. Forgive my analogy, but we just ended our basketball season with a terrible loss. But, the coach was always saying to the players, "Every possession matters. Take care of the ball. A careless pass could cost us the game. A foot out of balance by a quarter of an inch could cost us a game. Every point is important. Every possession matters." Well, in our lives as a Christian everything matters. We control so much of that by God's grace and His mercy.

Making progress in the spiritual life is important. We are not always to remain as infants only able to drink milk, but we must take our faith seriously and grow up becoming strong and able to eat the spiritual meat of perseverance. Perseverance, remaining faithful to Christ and His holy church in all that life brings our way, and doing so with joy, and thankfulness, and gratitude.

The more we embrace the things of the world, the pleasures of the world, the more difficult it is to let them go. There is a constant battle with the passions that according to Saint [Silvanus 00:11:38] as I've mentioned before, "It ends after we die," but this should not be discouraging to us. It should be encouraging. Knowing that Christ leads us where we need to go, if we are willing to follow. And that He gives us what we need to grow spiritually, if we are willing to accept it.

The Lord knows what we are made of. He knows our weakness, our vulnerabilities. He knows where we come from and our background, our upbringing, our struggles, our thoughts. Nothing is hidden from the all seeing and merciful eye of God. When we look honestly at ourselves seeing our passion, seeing our sin, seeing our weakness rooted deep in our hearts, it's not a cause for despair or hopelessness. Although these thoughts will try to raise their ugly heads, reject them, reject those thoughts. This self awareness becomes a time of repentance, confession, absolution, restoration, and with this comes joy and hope in our salvation.

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There is a line from one of the evening prayers that I especially like, it gives me a sense of hope when I read it. It's one of the prayers by Saint John of Damascus. This is the prayer that you read just before you go to bed at night. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it.

It reads, "Oh, master, lover of mankind, is this bed to be my coffin or will you enlighten my wretched soul with another day? Behold, the coffin lies before me. Behold, death confronts me. I fear oh Lord thy judgment and the endless torments. Yet, I cease not to do evil. My Lord God, I continually anger thee, and thy most pure mother, and all thy heavenly hosts, and my guardian angel. I know oh Lord, that I am unworthy of thy love for mankind, but am worthy of every condemnation and torment. But oh Lord," and this is the line that gives me hope, "But oh Lord, whether I will it or not save me, whether I will it or not save me. For to save a righteous man is no great thing and to have mercy on the pure in heart it's nothing wonderful for they are worthy. They are worthy of thy mercy, but on me, a sinner, on me, a sinner to show the wonder of thy mercy. In this reveal thy love for mankind, lest my wickedness prevail over thy inevitable goodness and merciful kindness."

Oftentimes our sins are not so much a denial of Christ as they are a weakness, a reflection of our past sins that creep back into our life. From the earliest centuries of the church, the holy Fathers have always acknowledged that we are fallen, that we are sinners, but they never lost hope. They never lost hope and God's mercy, love, and forgiveness. There are millions of saints, all of whom we commemorate this day, that are proof of God's love and mercy.

The first prayer in the preparation for confession that you are all familiar with, it was written in the fourth century by Saint Basil the Great. We're still using it today. In this prayer there is a line that reads, "Wherefore I, although unworthy both of heaven and of earth and of this temporary life, even I, a wretched sinner who had given myself over to every evil desire, despair not of salvation, despair not of salvation. There is no room for despair in a heart that is filled with hope, and Christ is our hope."

Christ is our hope. This is the Christ that we confess, the true Christ, the eternal Son of the eternal Father who condescended because of His infinite love to come and save us. Let us all continue to confess Him with our words, and with our deeds, and with a pure heart of humility and love. Let us imitate the saints of all generations that are first revered until the end. Amen.