

## **“What Do We Do With The Saints?”**

Liturgical Date: Feast of St. Simon and St. Jude (October 28)

Primary Texts: more topical, readings for the day are Psalm 43, Jeremiah 16:1-16, 1 Peter 1:3-9, and St. John 15:17-21

I greet you with the words of St. Peter as he begins his first Epistle, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Today is the feast day for two of the 12 Disciples, Sts. Simon and Jude, and the sermon is more topical and draws on several Scriptures including those appointed for today. We will briefly hear an overview of these two Disciples and then examine as the title of sermon asks, “What Do We Do With The Saints?”

Today’s feast day is one of the least-observed ones among Lutherans. There are a few reasons for that in that it is a minor as opposed to major feast and the Bible just does not tell us too much about these two disciples. Most of the Apostles have their own feast day, but like Sts. Philip and James the Less-Simon and Jude must share a day. But the biggest reason for its lack of frequent observance is that when it falls on a Sunday it is usually the same Sunday that churches are observing Reformation Day. But since we have our Reformation Service on the actual day this year-here we go!

These two disciples remind of us something we must always keep in mind when studying Biblical names. There were certain names that were incredibly common in First Century Israel. Among the 12 Disciples, half of the disciples had the same name as another disciple.

First up is St. Simon and there are at least 8 Simon’s described in the Bible. Of course, the leader of the Disciples, Peter, had the given name of Simon. The Simon that is remembered today is listed 10<sup>th</sup> in the four places

in the Bible where the 12 Disciples are listed. The Scripture tells us nothing of his family background. His name appears nowhere else other than in the listing of the Disciples-but we know he would have been present at key moments in Jesus' ministry when it tells us the Disciples were present. It does attach to him the title "The Zealot" or the "Cananaean" which is the Greek translation of the Aramaic word for "zealous one." Some have surmised that this refers to his zealous devotion to the faith. It more likely refers to that before joining the Disciples he was probably a revolutionary as the zealots were a faction that sought to overthrow Roman rule. Perhaps this initially attracted him to Jesus' message of being the Messiah and contributed to the false charges against Jesus that He sought to overthrow the Romans as He had a zealot among His Disciples. After the resurrection and Pentecost, Simon the Zealot, as with the other Apostles spread the Gospel as the "sent ones." There are various church traditions about where he went and what he did outside of the Bible. He was martyred for the faith, most likely crucified upside down in what is modern day Iran-as was Jude-thus the connection of their feast day and the fact that the liturgical color of the day is red signifying martyrdom. As Jesus stated in the Gospel Lesson, *"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you"* and *"If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."*

St. Jude appears 11<sup>th</sup> in the listings of the 12 Disciples. The Bible tells us a little more about him than St. Simon, but not too much more. Do note that this is not the same Jude who was the human author of the Biblical book of Jude-as Jude was yet another common name. We do know that he was "the son of James"-which was another incredibly common name of the time, so which James is uncertain. Tradition is that he was a fisherman, but this is not specifically told in the Bible. We do have one quote from Jude in the

Bible of him asking a question of Jesus on the night in which our Lord was betrayed and receiving an answer. As with Simon, Jude was present among the Disciples during Jesus ministry and spread the Gospel as an Apostle. As noted before, Church tradition is that he died in Iran being shot by arrows. As with Jeremiah in the Old Testament Lesson, Simon and Jude spoke the Word of God-no matter the consequences.

One interesting note about St. Jude is that he is known by more names than any of the other Disciples. Jude is actually short for “Judas”. Judas was yet another common name of the time in Israel and calling him Jude distinguishes him from the infamous traitor-disciple Judas Iscariot. He is also named as Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddeus.

OK. Now that we have heard a summary of these two lesser-known disciples, I want to move onto to discussing saints in general. With not only today, but with All Saints’ Day coming up on Thursday it is an appropriate time to address this. Why do these two guys have a special day to honor them? Furthermore, why does the church observe days to remember certain individuals? Isn’t all this “saint stuff” best left to the Catholics? As Lutheran Christians, what do we do with the Saints?

Well, in fact one of the reasons that I was led to preach on this today stems from a discussion about saints and their proper role and how we remember them that I recently had with one of our members who was raised Roman Catholic. There is no doubt that there have been many abuses related to venerating saints throughout Church History. The danger is when one begins to skirt or cross the line from honoring and commemorating to worship of saints, believing that they have special powers or abilities to do things for us, and focusing on the Saints more than God Himself. The Reformers recognized that the “cult of the saints” as the Book of Concord

refers to it, had gotten out of control. So many unbiblical practices had entered into the church and were even promoted by church leaders. And this is not only ancient history either.

To this day, many Roman Catholics will bury a statue of St. Joseph in their yard when trying to sell a home. A small statue kit can be purchased on Amazon for about \$6. Then you bury the statue upside down, facing the home, and pray to Joseph during the sale process. For modern times there are even guidelines for condos, where you can bury the statue in a planting pot. Also consider this example, many of you know that Pope John Paul II was a beloved pope whose sainthood was fast-tracked after his death. When he lay dying, some blood was drawn from him and it was later put into a special ornate vial. This relic has toured the world for people to come and venerate. It is kind of bizarre, actually. These practices are not things that Lutherans would endorse.

If you travel to an area where a large portion of the population is Roman Catholic you will quickly see the emphasis on the saints with statues, paintings, and all types of trinkets. When I was in Italy it was a little strange to go into a Cathedral and see mummified remains of saints on open display. And it is not only Rome, but the Eastern Orthodox as well that puts an extra-Biblical overemphasis on the Saints. This past summer when Raegan and I were in Greece, I experienced this firsthand. An incredible 98% of the population of Greece is Greek Orthodox. The Greek and other Orthodox Churches do not have statues of saints, but flat images called icons. Our bulletin cover is an icon painting of Simon and Jude. In Greece it seems that just about everything is named for saints *Agios* or *Agia* in Greek from towns, streets, even transit stations. Icons are everywhere. Just about every market shop in addition to food and alcohol, postcards, key chains, and magnets also

sells icons. Here is one (show) that I purchased-I will note that I got one of Jesus! Throughout the country there are little box or chapel like structures everywhere. These are shrines and when you look inside you see icons of saints with candles that can be lit as one prays to them.

Praying to saints is a common practice in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. There is a patron saint for just about anything you can think of. If one is suffering from epilepsy or having love problems they may pray to St. Valentine. If you are a police officer, then to St. Michael for protection. Protestants, including us Lutherans, do not pray to saints. Why? Simply put, we see no Biblical instruction to do so. What we do see is that the Bible continually says to pray to God Himself. 1 Timothy 2:5 states that there is *one* mediator between God and man and that is Jesus. Romans 8:34 says that Jesus, not the saints, is who makes intercession for us as our high priest. In our Psalm for today, as well as in many other places, we hear about calling out to God for deliverance-not to saints.

Now Catholics and Eastern Orthodox will say that they are just going through Mary or a saint to get to God. They say it is no different than asking a living Christian to pray for you. Do saints in heaven pray? I see no reason to believe that they would not. As Christians on earth we pray for others, and why we would stop doing so in heaven? In the Smalcald Articles Luther writes that the saints in heaven may indeed pray for us. But there is a large leap from believing that the saints in heaven pray for us and actually praying TO them to do so. We see no Scriptural mandate or permission to do so.

But for a moment, let's say for the sake of argument that you could pray to saints. I would ask, why would you want to? Consider this illustration. The principal of your child's school sends you a letter. He says you can contact him about any problem your child is having and he will

listen to you. The letter then gives you two options for contacting him. Option one is a direct phone number that he answers 24/7. Option 2 is to call his secretary, leave a message, wait for a return call, schedule an appointment, and then go through 3 administrators who will then relay the message. You then have a concern about your child in school. Which option will you choose? It's obvious. Why would you go through different layers when we can go right to the source? God tells us to pray to Him directly, anytime, anywhere. There is no need to go through Saints. Furthermore, praying to Saints rather than directly to God implies that perhaps God is too busy to hear you right away or needs some influential people to "lean on" Him in order to increase the chances your prayers are "answered."

So with all these abuses, misconceptions, and false teachings regarding saints, why do we commemorate them at all? Much of the Reformation under the influence of Zwingli and Calvin did take that approach eliminating days and feasts related to the Saints completely. But as I have said before, our Lutheran forefathers never took the position that we had to "throw the baby out with the bathwater" when it came to the traditional practices of the church. We have always held, as laid out in the Augsburg Confession Article XV, that we are not mandated to, but have liberty to, observe for the good order of the Church holy days and festivals in a proper, non-sinful way. Eliminating any emphasis on the saints such as the Reformed often do or emphasizing them to the point of neglect of Christ as Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy often do are not the only two options. As with many things, Lutheranism offers a "third way". There *is* a proper place and manner to commemorate the saints. But what is it?

Before I answer that specifically do note that the LCMS has a pretty extensive church calendar in terms of days related to saints. Grab your hymnal from the pew and turn to page xi. . Here you see a list of feasts and festivals throughout the Church Year. They remember key people from the New Testament, key events from the life of Jesus, and other important things. Remember that none of these are commanded, but as you see the ones in bold are called “Principal Feasts” and are observed by most Lutheran Churches especially when they fall on a Sunday. You can also see the “minor” feasts that are not bolded, including today’s.

Now turn to pages xii and xiii. Here you see an even more extensive lists of people that are commemorated on different days. These optional commemorations are not as commonly observed as the feasts and festivals but do contain a pretty interesting group of people if you look through it, from Old Testament saints, Early Church Fathers, heroes of the Reformation, artists and musicians, various martyrs, and even important events like The Council of Nicaea where the Nicene Creed was adopted. We don’t always observe all of these here at Christ the King, but I like to work them in as I can.

Also notice this page contains a great summary in answering in a proper way, “What do we do with the Saints”? A portion of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXI is quoted there. If you read this portion of the Augsburg Confession as well as the corresponding section in the Apology, the Lutheran Confession give clear and helpful teaching on the place of saints and how we remember them. I will quickly summarize the three main points.

First of all, we thank God for the great saints of the church. God in His mercy has called faithful servants and teachers of the Word throughout the history of the Church. From Hannah's faith in the promise of God to give her a son, to St. Patrick's escape from slavery to return to Ireland to preach the Gospel, to Johann Sebastian Bach's musical contributions God has been calling people to do mighty work for the Kingdom that is worthy to know and learn from. Secondly, our faith is strengthened when we look at the examples of how God showed mercy to the saints. Even these saints had failings and sins. When we remember and preach about the Saints, we don't turn them into "Christian Superheroes" that had no faults. Despite their sinful failings, God used them to accomplish His purposes and we see examples of His mercy. For example Peter failed miserably in denying Christ, but was restored and used in a powerful way. In this we take comfort in the grace of God and know that He can use us as well. Thirdly, we see in the saints examples of great faith and service to God's Kingdom. They are models to us in serving God and others. Above all what we should imitate is their *faith*, their trust in the Lord.

These are the good and proper ways the saints impact the church. We do not worship saints, but rather worship with them. We do not pray to them, but pray with them. We do not look to them to grant us favors, but thank God with them that the Lord has shown us His mercy and favor.

In closing, it is an important truth to know that all Christians are saints. The LCMS does not canonize certain people as saints and then relegate the rest of the church to some type of "other" category. The

New Testament refers to believers in Christ as “saints”. In the Apostles’ Creed we confess that the church is the “communion of saints.” All Christians are sinners who have and continue to violate the commandments of God. But all Christians are saints as well. It is not because of what we have done that we can dare to call ourselves saints, but in what Christ has done for us and worked in us. Saints Simon and Jude were called by Jesus and followed Him. Billions of others, both well known and not so well known have throughout history as well. And we rejoice with all believers of time and space that we have been redeemed by Christ Jesus and called by the Gospel into faith. Sinners, yes...but simultaneously saints in Christ.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.