
Blessed and Highly Favored

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Lauren Holder
All Saints' Day - Year A**

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.

I wonder if you happened to notice the collect Sam read at the beginning of the service—the collect for All Saints.

I understand that noticing the collect may not be a normal practice for most people, you may even be asking yourself what a *collect* is... it's a prayer. And in this case it's a prayer that attempts to collect the themes of the day, All Saints' Day, to set the tone for the rest of the service.

I'll admit some collects are more notable than others. But if you make a practice of paying attention to the collect, you might find that it actually achieves its purposes—to set the tone for the readings, music, sermon and prayers that follow.

Today's collect begins: "you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord..."

It is pure coincidence that the term "elect" is used two days before the elect-ion.

But pay attention to that image—the image of being knit together in one communion and fellowship. Each of us is "elect" because God "elected" to create each of us in God's own image. God chose you when God chose to create you, and your family, and your friends, and your neighbors, and the stranger, and the people you disagree with, and all who have died, and all who are taking their first breath right now. All of us are God's chosen, and all of us are invited to be knit together—to come together exactly as God lovingly and intentionally created us—in one communion and fellowship.

And did you hear what the collect calls that? Mystical. We are knit together in *one* communion in the *mystical* body of Jesus. Because, yeah, the idea of coming together—all of us. All. Of. Us. Sounds a little mystical, doesn't it? Sometimes it might even feel impossible... but let's stick with mystical for now.

You see, the beauty of All Saints' Day, is that it reminds us of the *changelessness* of God.

On All Saints, we remember baptism. Typically, we baptize lots of babies, and maybe a few adults, on All Saints. This year we welcome the newest Saints of this community by sharing pictures of their baptisms. But even when there are no baptisms, no matter what Episcopal church you are in, on the Feast of All Saints, we *remember* baptism by renewing our baptismal covenant. Year after year, we make the same promises. The world may change, and we may change, but our covenant with a *changeless* God does not.

On All Saints, we also remember all who have died in the past year. We say their names aloud, or listen to their names read aloud, as we hold onto that which death cannot take away—our love. We remember that in death, life is changed, not ended. And that's true because of God's eternal *changelessness*.

And so in remembering baptism and remembering all who have died, we *knit together* all the saints across time—saints that have been, saints that are, saints that will be... and this knitting together of different people and different times and different iterations of God's image... it too speaks to the truth that God does not change.

In the midst of so much change and uncertainty—clinging to the truth that God is the same, yesterday, today, tomorrow, and the day-after-tomorrow.

This, my friends, is a blessing.

Our Gospel reading today speaks a lot about blessing and being blessed and who is blessed.

The word blessed gets thrown around so much these days that the Biblical meaning may get lost. What does it mean to be blessed?

When I served a parish in New York, a woman named Pam taught me something about what it means to be blessed. If I saw her in the sacristy, half awake and preparing for the early service... how you doing Pam? "I am blessed and highly favored." If I saw her at Bible study, easing into her seat after a long day at work... how's your day Pam? "I am blessed and highly favored." If I talked to her after a vestry meeting, having just debated the pros and cons of a financial decision... how are you feeling Pam? "I am blessed and highly favored."

It didn't matter how beautiful or bad the weather was, it didn't matter how backed up the trains were, it didn't matter if she had just nailed a presentation or if her arthritis was acting up. No matter how things changed around Pam, she remained firmly planted in the truth that she was blessed—blessed! And highly favored. Her blessedness had nothing to do with her conditions, and everything to do with her trust in the unconditional love of Jesus. Her being highly favored had nothing to do with good behavior or good fortune, and everything to do with her trust that she was lovingly created in the image of God.

I am blessed and highly favored. You are blessed and highly favored. When we slow down and acknowledge that we are in the very presence of God—that God is moving in our lives and in our communities—that Jesus lives! And loves! Through you! We are blessed.

When we allow ourselves to trust in the eternal changelessness of God, we are blessed.

When we allow ourselves to be knit together in *one* community in the *mystical* body of Jesus, we are blessed.

When we allow ourselves to *receive* the blessing that God always offers, without exception or condition, we are blessed.

Blessings are offered, and blessings are received. Blessings are not earned, attained or achieved. Just like the mystical body of Christ—we can receive the body of Christ and become the body of Christ, but we cannot earn it or possess it or create it.

St. Augustine, when talking about the Eucharist, said: receive what you are, become what you receive. Receive the body of Christ, which you are! And become the body of Christ. And so it goes with blessings—receive the blessing that you are blessed, and become the blessing that you receive.

When we receive blessings and become blessed—when we receive the body of Christ and become the body of Christ—that mystical unity of being knit together in one community becomes more fully known in our homes, community and world. It's the kingdom of God, friends! And it's near. And it's now.

God is near, and God is now. And at the end of the week, God will still be near and now.

Will you draw near to God to receive the blessing that you are?

Because you are blessed, and highly favored.

Amen.