

**God's Saints Celebrating True Life**  
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All Saints Sunday, November 1, 2009

Many of you were here to hear it. Others will have a chance to read it in November's edition of *The Zion Herald*. But my favorite way of thinking about the saints, whom we celebrate with the Festival of All Saints Sunday – falling precisely where it should this year on November 1<sup>st</sup> – is found in the opening of my message at the funeral service for Anna Mae Le Beau. “This has been a year filled with lots of high profile funerals: newscaster Walter Cronkite and commentator Paul Harvey; politicians Ted Kennedy from the left and Jack Kemp on the right; columnist William Safire; and Hollywood-types like Karl Malden and Michael Jackson.”

I've got to confess that I really hesitated when it came to mentioning Michael Jackson, especially at an occasion like our Lutheran Service of Christian Burial; but of all the persons mentioned, he more so than all of the rest illustrated the problem with these high profile funerals, which is this, that “all forms of media from every corner of the globe covered these events with non-stop, wall-to-wall, twenty-four hour programming. You'd have thought that those media stars and pop icons were saints – which they weren't – when, in fact, on the day we gathered in our corner of Stark County, with nothing more than friends and family, with telephone calls and word-of-mouth to spread the news, we were celebrating the life of a woman who really is a saint, both in Luther's terms of being saved by grace through faith, and in terms of the life she lived, the love she shared, the difference she made on all who knew her, who learned from her, who admired her from near and far, because of the size of her heart, the strength of her will, the virtues she embodied, and the grace that was her way through life, right up to her very last breath.”

Luther had both personally and pastorally lived in a church where church leaders were quite effective exploiting the fears that believers had when it came to thinking about judgment, condemnation and damnation. Generous gifts were given, indulgences were printed and purchased, for oneself and loved ones, to shorten time in purgatory, or to go directly to paradise in heaven. Exploiting this feat of death was a fundraising bonanza; and those who could afford to play were happy to pay in order to assuage their guilt and bolster their confidence that they had done what they could to secure a seat at the great banquet in the sky forever. In this regard, Luther saw the need to take the focus of trust off what we do or what we give, and place it where it belongs, namely, on Christ, on what Christ had done and on what Christ has given, in life and through death, to forgive our past, secure our future and fill our present with a love that will never ever let us go.

To some degree, of course, this was a matter of being truthful with reality, since when it comes to dealing with the curse of our mortality, there is absolutely nothing we can do to alter the outcome of death's claims. We may change the circumstances, delay the timing,

but not alter the outcome. There is an unbridgeable gulf that separates our humanity from God's divinity. From our side, there is an uncrossable chasm that defines the difference between our mortality and God's eternity. That's the indisputable sign of sin's reign and power. None can dispute the truth of this reality. All have sinned. All will die. To a larger degree, however, Luther's concern with these issues was a matter of listening to the Good News of the Gospel and believing the truth about God. God has done what we could not. God has taken our death upon Himself in the body of Christ on the Cross, replacing the curse of certain death with the promise of true life, replacing certain death with the promise of life in Christ, a gift of grace, and not just a promise, but a pledge and a journey that begins here in the life of the Body of Christ we call the Church.

When it comes to celebrating the saints, that's the other part of the equation I referenced in the funeral sermon of Anna Mae. She didn't just ponder the possibilities of the grace of God extended through the promise of true life. She decided to believe God's promise and live the life God's grace makes possible. We are made saints by grace through faith; but the witness we offer as God's saints is also part of the point we celebrate with All Saints Sunday. As saints, we are free to lay hold of the life God gives in Christ. We are free from those fears that are easily exploited by others. We are free from the fear that we'll never get what God calls us to do perfectly right. That's true. Getting it perfectly right died on the Cross in Christ. It died in the reality of our being sinners. But from the death of acknowledging our sin comes the freedom to live the grace God gives through the love Christ shares and life our Lord promises. Luther was very clear on this matter. We need deny our being sinners no more, not so we can show the world what sinners we are, but in order to show the world the life God's grace makes possible and real through our witness.

In this regard, Anna Mae was an extraordinary woman, but always and only to show us how it's done – not by calling attention to ourselves and pointing to how good we are, but by trusting the grace God gives and sharing the love that's in us because Christ lives in us and loves through us. Whether we're talking about Anna Mae, whose service of Christian Burial is still so very fresh on our minds, or, reaching back to last year, we refer as well to Aleene Heist, Fred Elsass, Cora Lanzalotta, or Marge Woodside: these brothers and sisters in Christ offered a similar witness to what it means to be God's saints. None of these saints presented themselves as the new resource of true faithfulness; all were happy (and blessed) to be ongoing evidence that the grace God gives, the life Christ promises, the love that is in us does indeed still have the power to set us free to stand in faith and live to serve. That's the freedom Paul was talking about last week. He knew Christ's love personally, and described its power with rhetorical flair. Paul lays out the case that God's love in Christ has set us free from our fear of God's judgment, free from sin's power to rule us, free from the burdens of guilt, free from the curse of death. God's love is so powerful, so present, so persuasive that nothing can separate us from its live-giving embrace, nothing, not fear, sin, guilt, nor even death. The Gospel makes it so very clear. We are free to live for the good we can do, for the right that may come and the truth God proclaims, the truth of God's love, and power to share it ... in Jesus' name. Amen