A couple of decades ago, shortly before my father died, our family learned more than we ever had about the Mitchell family tree. For many generations, my father's family had made what was once a fairly common error of believing their ancestors were Dutch because they had heard they were “Deutsch.” Because I had lived in the Dutch Fork region of South Carolina for a number of years, I had already learned of this mass misunderstanding of people who did not realize that being “Deutsch” meant they were of German heritage. Around the time my father neared the end of his life, some family members had pieced together a genealogy that began in the late 1700's when a man named Johann Peter Mischler immigrated from Germany to the United States. Mischler was a scoundrel of sorts, an uneducated, basically deputized Lutheran pastor who bumbled his way south from Pennsylvania through Virginia, finally ending up in remote Pendleton County in the rugged West Virginia mountains. Embarrassed by their father's reputation, Mischler's sons changed their name to Mitchell, a name which has remained unchanged for more than 200 years.

My father delighted in the history of Peter Mischler and his descendants and gobbled up this information he had never learned when he was growing up. He loved hearing about those who carried the Mitchell legacy forward to him and his children; Daddy even got a kick out of hearing about Peter Mischler's escapades. I have a certain amount of pride in being a descendant of simple, honest, hardworking people, who, by most accounts, loved God, family and the tough land that was their legacy. I don't claim to be any better a pastor than Mischler, but I find it kind of cool that I'm only the second pastor in this branch of the Mitchell family in over two centuries. At the same time, I realize that I have done nothing to earn the Mitchell name or any of the history that comes with it. I simply received those things because I was born to Jesse Mitchell of Franklin, West Virginia.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we honor those known by the name “Saint,” and consider how they came to be called by that name. What does it mean to be called a saint? Does a person have to be of a particular lineage? Does he or she have to be perfect? Gifted? Virtuous? Dead? Talk of saints is sometimes talk of extraordinary people who were outstanding examples of faithful living who have left this world and entered eternal life with God. Each of us is lucky if we have had one or two such people in our lives but such saints are extraordinary because there haven't been that many of them. Most of our family trees are filled with more ordinary folks: imperfect, sometimes bumbling or less than truthful, impatient and bull-headed; in short, real human beings like you and me.

So, supposing one doesn't have to be perfect or gifted or pure to be a saint, how does it happen? It turns out we get the identity of saint the same way we receive our other identities: we are born into it. Sainthood is not ours for the earning, but God's for the giving. We are made saints by being born into the love of God - a God who sees us for who we are and for who we can be, just as God sees our world for what it is and will be. The vivid language of the lesson from Revelation paints a picture of the life to come – a fantastical image of heaven where God's people wear gleaming white robes bleached in the blood of the Lamb and wave palm branches, symbols of victory reminiscent of those held high when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. God's saints gather at the throne to worship him day and night. They live in a paradise where no one is hungry or thirsty, where no one can come to any harm, where no one has any reason to cry. You and I thank God for welcoming our loved ones – all the saints who from their labors rest - into such a paradise where they see and know and live with God face to face.

We long for the day when we will live there ourselves. But we live in the here and now, in this world, this place where white robes can have an entirely different meaning, washed not in the blood of the Lamb but defiled by the blood of the innocent. We live in a world where those who have no power or voice or freedom are trampled upon by those who have all of those things, many of them – the haves and the have nots - in the positions they are in simply because they were born into them, through no fault or credit of their own. It turns out Jesus has a lot to say about this world in which we live and about our place in it. Jesus speaks blessings upon those who are poor in spirit AND those who are poor in earthly things. He mourns with those who mourn and loves the meek, those the world cannot or will not acknowledge. Jesus sees and honors all people in this world, especially those who are struggling and have lost hope. Jesus also honors and equips those who reach out with hands of mercy, who seek peace in the world, in their communities and in their families. Jesus sends those of us he calls his body out with blankets and rent money and disaster relief and protest signs, with outstretched hands of compassion and grace, to touch and pray and help lift up those who have fallen. He calls us to be bridge-builders and shelter providers and safe haven for the lost.

In these first days of November, in midst of the landscape that is dying around us and the cold that is beginning to wrap itself around us, Jesus shines his light into our darkness and melts all that is frozen around and within us. He tells us that this world, in all its infinite beauty and perfection, this world that has been defiled and distorted by collective generations of sinners, including you and me, that this world is even now being made new and perfect once more.

During the Middle Ages, a story about Christ's saving power circulated among Christians. The story, called the Golden Legend, traced the wood of the cross back to the sacred tree in the Garden of Eden. The same wood was said to be used in Noah's Ark and in Solomon's Temple and then became the support beams in the stable where Jesus was born. This Golden Legend ties together creation, God's salvation story, the incarnation of Jesus, and his death on the cross. Through that cross and Jesus' resurrection, we see God working to renew creation. You and I live in the midst of that renewal and are ourselves being made new creations every day.

We know the best is to come and yet somehow is already here. The meal we share at our Lord's table prepares us for the heavenly banquet at which we will join all those who have gone before us. With our future secure, we are freed to live as active saints of God, reaching out to a battered world which fears the future and feels the dreadful pain of the present. We bear new creation to those who still live in the death grasp of hunger and thirst and hardship and bitter tears.

This All Saints' Day ties together the past, present and future. The hands of our ancestors have brought about such good and perpetrated such evil. As we continue their legacy, we wonder what kind of a world we will leave those who come after us. But today we are reminded of the power of the one who redeems us from all the wrong that we perpetrate on one another and on the earth. You and I, the cloud of witnesses that came before us and those who will follow us, are made holy, set apart for God's use, not because of anything within us, but because of the one who came to dwell among us and save us from ourselves. It turns out that one doesn't have to be perfect or gifted or pure to be a saint, just brought into being and loved by God. And, by the crazy logic and power of God, that includes everyone, you, me, the Peter Mischlers of this world, everyone God has created, sinners and saints together.

Amen.

*All Saints*

*November 5, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 5:1-12*