Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA *November 1, 2026*

God's Children…NOW!

Readings Bulletin

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every year when All Saints Sunday arrives, the church risks falling into what might be called "stained-glass paralysis." We look at traditional windows and see glowing, pristine figures; serene, spotless, and morally heroic, as if they never lost their temper or woke up in a cold sweat at 2:00 AM.

That mythological imagery paralyzes us. It turns sainthood into an exclusive club for moral overachievers, whispering the lie that holiness belongs only to those who have eliminated every trace of human limitation. The rest of us look at our chaotic weeks, unresolved wounds, and fragile relationships, and assume we are disqualified from true sainthood.

That is one reason I treasure the bold confession printed on the front of our bulletin every Sunday at St. Stephen, "We don't expect perfect, put-together people… show up as who you are." Those words are anchored in the scandalous grammar of our second reading. The First Letter of John does not say, "Once you clean up your act, resolve your doubts, and polish your halos, God will finally adopt you." No! John looks at a stumbling community and proclaims, "Beloved, we are God's children *now*; what we will be has not yet been revealed."

Hear that radical word, **Now**. Now, in the messy present tense. Right in the middle of your tiredness, grief, and unfinished business. In the logic of God's grace, sainthood is not a trophy awarded at the finish line of moral perfection. Sainthood is the gift of belonging to God today. We are "saints in the rough," beloved dust being held and shaped by grace.

This gospel comes as an antidote to a culture drowning in the curated self. Sociologists and the U.S. Surgeon General continue to warn of an epidemic of perfectionism and anxiety, especially among youth. We swim in a digital

ecosystem of algorithms and AI filters that train us to airbrush our faces and hide our wounds before stepping into public view.

We are taught that being seen is dangerous unless we are flawless. We exhaust ourselves maintaining a bulletproof persona, but beneath that polished surface, our souls are lonely. When we believe we are only lovable if we perform without error, we trap ourselves in isolation.

This obsession with curated perfection is the core logic of Empire. Under our capitalist systems, human beings are too often reduced to productivity metrics or their credit scores. The Empire insists that your worth is strictly transactional. Perform, look good, and don't make mistakes, or be discarded.

And then Jesus climbs a mountain, sits in the dirt, and teaches the Beatitudes. Look at who Jesus names as blessed. Not the highly efficient, the wealthy, or the undefeated. He looks at the crowd and says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Every condition Jesus names is an ache, a limitation, or an emptiness. To be "poor in spirit" means to stand with empty hands, possessing no leverage. Jesus looks at people whose lives are cracked open and declares that the Kin-dom of God belongs to them! The gospel never demands that you polish your cracked container. The gospel reveals that it is precisely through the cracks that God's light pours into the world.

This is the promise of Psalm 34, "Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed." The psalmist does not say, "Polish yourself until you generate your own glow." Radiance is not self-made; radiance is reflected light! When a rough stone sits in the morning sun, it catches the rays and gleams as brightly as a cut jewel. You do not need to be smoothed into marble to reflect God's goodness. You only have to face the Sun. When we turn our unvarnished faces toward God's compassionate gaze, shame loses its power.

If you want to see that truth on a cosmic scale, look at Revelation 7. A vast multitude that no one can count stands before the throne. When the elder asks who these people in white robes are, he receives this paradoxical answer, "These are

they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

You cannot wash a white garment in red blood and expect a sterile lab coat! John of Patmos deliberately shatters our sanitized fantasies of holiness. The saints around the throne are not disembodied spirits floating above human pain. They have come through the **ordeal**. They walked through the mud. They bear the scars of struggle, the ache of heartbreak, and the dust of real-world tears.

Their robes are radiant not because they lived sheltered lives, but because they allowed their wounds and failures to be held in the self-giving love of the Lamb. And look at who shepherds them, "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." In worldly empires, thrones belong to apex predators who rule by fear. In the Kin-dom of God, the throne belongs to a slain and risen Lamb. This Lamb-Shepherd leads them to living water, and with wounded hands, tenderly wipes every tear from their eyes. God does not tell you to pull yourself together before you approach. God leans in close to you, honors your journey, and dries your tears.

All Saints Sunday is not an invitation to admire dead heroes from a safe distance; it is a summons into honest spiritual mirror-work. As Brother Richard Rohr reminds us, true transformation begins when we rest in the compassionate gaze of God. In that gaze, our ego can begin to loosens its grip. The ego that is so obsessed with fashioning a dazzling halo; wanting to look superior, hide weakness, and control how others see us. But genuine holiness begins when the halo drops.

I invite our assembly into a brief exercise right now, right where you are sitting in your pews. Take a slow breath. Unclench your jaw, drop your shoulders, and gently bring both hands to your face. Cup your eyes and cheeks in your palms. Feel the warmth of your skin.

Behind your hands, in your own heart, bring to mind the "filter" or mask you felt you had to wear this morning, the capable professional who never falters, the cheerful neighbor who never struggles, the perfect parent, or the devout Christian who never doubts. Feel how exhausting it is to hold that mask in place.

Now, as you breathe out, slowly draw your hands down from your face, resting them open in your lap, palms facing upward. Open your eyes. Look forward with

an unvarnished face and hear the promise of Psalm 34, “Look to God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.”

Look toward your God. You do not need an artificial filter or a plastic halo. Right now, God gazes upon you with infinite tenderness and love; looking at your tired eyes, unpolished thoughts, and rough edges, and saying, “You are my child now. You are beloved dust. You belong here.”

Biblical righteousness is never moral perfection. Righteousness is simply living as we were created to live. God did not create you to be a plaster statue; God created you to be human. And so we rest in the quiet mystery of 1 John, “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” Discipleship is not instant perfection; it is a lifelong grace of becoming. It is learning to trust that mercy is fresh every morning.

Today, as we light candles, toll the bell, and speak the names of our beloved saints who have entered into rest, we do not honor them because they were flawless heroes. We remember them because they were faithful in their roughness! We remember the grandmother with work-worn hands, the friend who fought bravely through illness or addiction, the quiet soul who washed dishes when no one noticed, and the neighbor who showed up with soup and silence. They were real people who stumbled, laughed, wept, and clung to a God who never let them go.

On your forehead, the cross of Jesus Christ has already been traced over your dust. In holy baptism, God claimed you before you had achieved a single line on your resume. Leave this sanctuary today “walking wet” in that promise. Refuse the tyranny of the curated self. Drop your artificial halos. Look at your neighbor with eyes of grace, knowing that they, too, are an unfinished masterpiece in the hands of the Potter.

Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be, go be children of God…NOW. Amen.