

“I believe in the communion of saints”

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne August 12, 2007

Each time we worship together around this altar, I ask God to bless the bread and wine of communion, and I say the words, “*And now with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we sing to proclaim the glory of your name ...*” Have you ever stopped to consider those were more than just churchy words. They are a weekly reminder we are all joined together, as we share in communion. Those words also remind us we are joined together with those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. This sacrament of communion brings us into communion with God and into a community with many others, living and dead. Yes ... Have you ever stopped to consider what an amazing thing this is we get to do here each week?

Reading from Revelation (7:9-11,13-14,16-17 NLT)

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting ... “Salvation comes from our God on the throne and from the Lamb!” And all the angels were standing around the throne ... and they [all] fell face down before the throne and worshiped God. Then one of them ... asked me, “Who are these who are clothed in white? Where do they come from?” And I said to him, “Sir, you are the one who knows.” Then he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes in the blood of [Jesus] the Lamb and made them white. They will never again be hungry or thirsty, and they will be fully protected from the scorching noontime heat. For [Jesus Christ] the Lamb who stands in front of the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away all their tears.”

Reflection

Last week we talked about how the church was universal ... taking in people who agreed to the catholic faith, a common faith that has been believed by everyone, in all places, at all times. This catholic church is universal, that's what the word catholic meant for centuries before it began to be used solely for members of the Roman Catholic church. And so it stands to reason that if the church has been filled with faithful people for centuries, it's bigger than anything one person says. And get this: The catholic church is more than a universal church because it extends around the world, it's universal because it also extends into the world to come.

When you hear that John sees a vast crowd in Heaven, filled with people from every family, language, nation and tribe, it might remind you of the promise we heard last week. Jesus had said people will come from all over the world to enter the kingdom. Faith in Jesus is not restricted to any one group,

any one type of person, for, as we heard last week, the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all people, and all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. So who are these folk in heaven? We call them the saints, those faithful Christ Followers who have already lived and died. They have entered into God's presence in a way we can not know or understand or experience now, except in small bits. I understand this, for many people it sounds too good to be true. It sounds like a story fit for children. It is. It's a story perfectly fit for all who are children of God, for those who do call on the name of Jesus and trust in his promises. And the story tells us two great things about our faith:

- (1) Life continues on in God's presence for those who trust and follow him in this world, even if the life of saints may get really hard ... and ...
- (2) We don't lose our connection to those who have died and gone before us, nor will we lose our connection to the faithful who come after us

Look around you and what do you see. In this church you see a diverse group of people. You may also see some empty chairs. But there's more still that you do not see, a presence which stretches back, and into the future. The church to which we belong is never just made up of the people you see now, but includes all those who have gone before, and those new people who come here next week. We are connected to all the people who have ever been baptized and given their lives to Jesus in this place. We are connected to those who have died, like Karen Peck and Wade Matthews and Carla Speranza and Walter Assur ... they were people who prayed here, and had communion together here, and were buried from here. In fact Christians believe that our prayers join with their prayers in the presence of God the same moment we say them this morning. Jesus has called us each by name ... but he has drawn us into community with one another and with all. He may be the one foundation of the church, but then his church extends behind us and before us as a universal community of saints, both living and dead.

The Church's One Foundation

*The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord
She is his new creation by water and the word
From Heaven he came and sought her, to be his holy bride
And with his blood he bought her, and for her sake he died
Elect from every nation yet one o'er all the earth
One charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food
And to one hope she presses with every grace endued
Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war
She waits the consummation of peace for ever more
Til with a vision glorious her longing eyes are blessed
And the great church victorious shall be the church at rest
Yet she on earth has union with God the three in one
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won
O happy ones and holy, Lord give us grace that we,
Like them the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with thee*

Intro to the message: Many people have trouble accepting the part of the creed where they are asked to say, "I believe in the holy catholic church." Many more have trouble understanding the phrase that comes after that one: "I believe in the communion of the saints." Ask four people to describe what that means and you'll get three different answers, and a blank stare. Let me ask you ... does the phrase communion of saints refer to ...

- (a) a belief that good Christians have communion together?
- (b) a belief that we share in the same communion service that has been important since the days of the earliest saints?
- (c) a churchy version of "breakfast of champions"?

You know sometimes things stick with you, and I'm afraid I've just spoiled the creed for myself for years to come as every time I say it now I think of eating my spiritual Wheaties ... Actually here the word communion refers to a sense of community we have with the saints. Think of it as a Christian family reunion. Or it means that belonging to the church is not only open to everyone regardless of where they were born, it is open to everyone regardless of when they have died.

Today we have a great visible reminder of what it means to be part of this communion of saints. We're using a special silver cup and plate for communion today. They were given to me by an elderly priest who belongs to the same monastic organization I belong to. It's called the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I've been an associate of the order for many years now. Well, this cup and plate belonged to a Father Morse, who lived early in the 20th century. We have a couple of pictures of him for you to see. Fr. Morse was a priest who traveled in poverty throughout China. In the 1940's when China became closed to outside religions, Father Morse made his way through Korea and was a missionary in Japan. He set up clinics to care for the needy, he taught the children, he found ways to feed those who otherwise would have gone without. And throughout all those years, while he was travelling around on donkey, he carried this wooden box, which contained the silver communion set you see here. Think of it. For fifty years he gave communion to people throughout Asia from this cup.

Today, when you come up to share in communion, you'll be connected to his ministry, to all those he served, and saved, and in a way to all who drank from this same cup. Welcome, my friends, to the communion of saints.

Some of you may be wondering, but is that in the Bible? Sure. The Bible gives us glimpses of how we are connected to others through our faith. Last week we heard how we are the body of Christ. All of us are connected to one another by our faith in Jesus, so that when one part of the body suffers we all suffer, and when one part rejoices, we can all rejoice. But there are other references. For instance, the author of Hebrews tells us in detail about the many saints who had lived and died nobly, who had stayed faithful to Jesus no matter what the consequences of their faith were. Then the author states: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down ... and hinders our progress ..."

[Hebrews 12:1-2 NLT]

It's not just the example of these saints that matters, but their continuing presence with you in a way that can't be explained. The saints surround you even now ...

It's not just the example of these saints that matters, but their continuing presence with you in a way that can't be explained. The saints surround you now. The Bible often speaks of saints and angels as partners with those who are

alive. Jesus himself gave us a picture of this when he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me ... And take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven." [Matthew 18 NRSV]. Sure, Jesus doesn't go into detail about what angels look like or who is and who is not a saint, except to call us into a child like faith. He may not give details about angels, and folks, it's a topic that doesn't merit a lot of concern. I think it's enough to know that the saints and angels are now in God's presence, they see him face to face. There is nothing holding them back from God's embrace. Or as John told us in the image from Revelation, there is no pain or crying for them, no darkness, no death. And God himself has wiped away every last tear from their eyes. It must be a blessed thing to be one of the community of saints. There's no value in knowing more about angels, or looking for them, or trying to get your personal angel to help you or run spiritual errands for you. Praying to the saints is not something Jesus asked you to do. He mentioned them in passing and I figure that's all I need to know about it. All I need to know about it but not all I need to do about it.

If it sounds good, and you want to be part of the communion of saints, there's good news here. You can be. That's the whole point. So let's ask the big question: "What difference does

this make in my life?" Indeed, why bother talking about something that's a mystery unless it has some meaning for your life? So here goes ... To be part of the communion of saints gives your life an added element you will not find anywhere else. For example, there's hope to be found here. It's because the faithful who die are not lost to God that you do not need to mourn them forever. You know what it's like to lose someone you love I am sure. We all live through the deaths of people we know and love. Sometimes it's a family member, sometimes the death of a parent can really shake you up. If you've watched a loved one die after a long illness, or a friend die suddenly in an accident, you know there's a pain in knowing they are gone. But they are not goners when it comes to God, not if they trusted in him. When a faith-filled person dies you can grieve. It's only natural. You will miss them. But you can not grieve to think they have missed God's kingdom. Christians believe in a God who holds onto us whether we're alive, or we've died. That's a source of hope for all who are Christians.

Having hope for the future, changes how you live now. The belief in life after death changes your life before death. You can live with a godly confidence. For if it were only for this world that we trusted in God, the Bible tells us, *"we would be of all people most to be pitied."* If we did not believe in this connection between those who live and those who are dead and that we are all connected to God ... then our faith would be just plain silly. Why bother with it? We read in the Bible: *"If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries ..."* [1 Corinthians 15:19-20 The Message]. Believing in the communion of saints means believing your life is about much more than a few short years. It's about God, it's about eternity.

Now once again, like last week, I need to tell you that is something not always taught in churches today. I've met many preachers who will say in private, if not in public, they don't believe in life after death any more. It's confusing to me. What does that say about believing in the resurrection of Jesus? I guess not much. For them, Jesus was just a good teacher? That's something the leader of the Episcopal Church has suggested ... saying she was not sure about any life after death. That just makes my head hurt. I wonder why I would bother talking about Jesus if that's what I believed. The same famous Bishop I quoted last week who said he was glad to belong to a church where if you didn't agree with parts of the creed you could just skip them ... well he was asked in an interview this month about whether he has been afraid of dying. He said, *"Death is not the worst thing. If there is a reward in Christianity,"* (did he really mean to say if there is, like there might not be any reward for faith?), *"it is that we need not fear death. If something happens to me while I am following God's call,"* he added, *"then that makes me happy ... and I will die happy. That is a blessing."* Is dying happy the best a Christian can hope for? Then we are to be pitied. My guess is this Bishop is also skipping over the part of the creed about the communion of the saints.

That's a shame. No, really. Well, I'll agree at least in this: part of the reward for your Christian faith is found in the blessings God offers you here and now. He offers you courage and guidance to do his will, he offers you forgiveness so you can live without shame. He gives you these things so you can give them to others, and likewise, to forgive others as you have been forgiven. But then, when your life here ends, there is not an end of God's blessings. God offers you something more. You remain connected to him, to life. And precisely because God does offer you eternal life, you can live with a greater confidence and a sense of purpose in this life. Everything you do here and now has eternal consequences. When I say I believe in the communion of saints, I am stating that I believe ultimately nothing is lost in death. Nothing I do is useless, nothing I go through is totally pointless, no act of service goes unseen, no love given is wasted, because everything in my life is somehow connected to a larger plan I can not see yet.

That's why I want to be part of the communion of the saints. Now and forever. I want to follow the examples they have given me for following Jesus. I don't spend a lot of time praying to the saints. I pray to God. I don't worship the saints. The Bible says there's only one whom we worship: God. Still I can be encouraged by the saints, I can ask them to pray for me and with me.

When I was a lot younger we had a song we could sing about being like the saints. It was kind of catchy at the time ...

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
Patient and brave and true
Who toiled and fought and lived and died
For the Lord they loved and knew*

The song went on in a very British sounding way to tell me about the saints:

*And one was a doctor and one was a queen
And one was a shepherdess on the green
They were all of them saints of God
And I mean God helping, to be one too.*

That song told me the saints may be people like me, but they had learned much better than me how to live and die for the Lord they loved and knew. I'm still working on that, and I've got a lot of work left to do. Still it was reassuring to think the saints were not a different species, they were regular people to start with. The song went on, climaxing in what sounded almost like a Gilbert and Sullivan tune from one of those comic operas from long ago:

*They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus's will
You can meet them in school or in lanes or at sea
In church, or in trains, or in shops ... or at tea
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too*

Can't you just see yourself sitting down to tea with a few saints one day soon? No? Can you see yourself becoming a saint someday soon? Maybe you think, "*No. No one will be naming a church after me.*" You're probably right. But before you put all the saints up on pedestals, like statues, that funny old song reminds us the saints all started out like regular folk, like you and me. And there's a way you can become one too, there's a way for you to take your rightful place in the community of saints.

It all starts by not trying to become a saint, but just trying to follow Jesus. That's it. Jesus makes saints out of sinners who choose to follow him. Let me say that again, Jesus makes saints out of the sinners who choose to follow him. So if you're a sinner, you've got an opportunity to join the saints. Focus not on getting a halo, but on getting closer to Jesus. That's your challenge this week. As one saint said it centuries ago, "*Day by day, may I see God more clearly, love God more dearly, and follow him more nearly.*" That's a great place for you to start this week. In each day look for where God is at work in you, and in people around you. You don't have to come up with miracles. Find what God is doing and join him

in doing it. Then learn in each day how to love God more, and ask to be filled more and more with his love. There's no way you can love your neighbor or forgive anyone else until you have more of God's love and forgiveness in your life. Ask for it, pray for it, open yourself up to it, every day this week. It will

change your life. And don't forget to follow Christ, follow his example, follow his guidance, follow his teachings. Do that and you will find you don't create so many headaches or heartaches for yourself. Folks, you don't need to try for a halo. Your halo will take care of itself. God blesses those who seek him first in their lives. But hurry folks. This is a limited

time offer that is available now, but not forever ... and there is no guarantee in the end someone will name a church after you, only that you will take your place in the congregation of believers who live in God's presence for ever. Then, in that day, the work you have started here will become fulfilled as you will finally be able to see God face to face, love him fully, for you will have followed him all the way back home.

That's your challenge this week. As one saint said it centuries ago, "Day by day, may I see God more clearly, love God more dearly, and follow him more nearly."