

I believe in...
The Communion of Saints

**A Sermon for All Saints Day by
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And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ... Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith....

Hebrews 11:32-38; 12:1-2a NRSV

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed

me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "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. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Revelation 7:9-17 NRSV

Almost every week we recite the Apostle's Creed and there, almost at the end of it, as part of a sort of laundry list of beliefs, are the words, "the communion of saints." Did you ever wonder what that phrase means? By the end of today's sermon I hope you'll have three things in mind the next time you say, "I believe in...the communion of saints."

First of all, those words mean that we take fellowship – that is, "communion" – with other Christians seriously. In the New Testament the word "saint" always refers to someone who is a) alive and b) a believer. It was only much later that we began to think of saints as especially good people and perhaps even having miraculous powers. But the plain Biblical meaning of the word tells us that a saint is any person who has given their life to Christ and been saved by his grace.

There are all kinds of stories in the New Testament of how the first believers, "the saints," cared for each other, pooled their resources, and prayed for each other. In those days when you became a Christian you left one family (your family of origin, or your "first" family) and joined another family (the one we like to call your "Second" family). This *second* family literally replaced your *first* one, largely because your *first* one usually disowned you when you became a Christian.

The Greek word we translate as "communion" is "*koinonia*". Some of you know that "*koinonia*" means intimate fellowship and deep community. To say that we believe in the "communion of saints" means that we believe that Christians within a congregation like ours are meant to treat each other like family: caring for each other, pooling our resources, and praying for

each other. In the Second Family we take *koinonia* with each other as seriously as we do *koinonia* with God.

Loving other Christians is no easy task, of course. If you've tried it perhaps you'd agree with the old adage:

*What joy to love the saints above
When I get home to glory.
To love below, the saints I know,
Well, that's another story!*

It isn't always easy to get along with everyone in our biological families. Christian families are no different. But to say we believe in the communion of saints means that at the end of the day we are going to sit down and break bread with each other despite our differences. It means we take more seriously our oneness in Christ than our diverse preferences and opinions. I once heard a Korean pastor say that in his culture if you eat three times with an enemy they become your friend. There's truth to that. To say we believe in the communion of saints means that we'll keep sharing this supper (at the Lord's Table) with each other until enemies become friends, and we really *feel* what this table represents – our family unity in Christ.

The second thing I think of when I think of the communion of saints is the joy of the saints in Heaven. Christians believe that our physical end is less a *death* than a *birth* in that it is the beginning of the best part of a person's life. And we believe that people who have died in the faith aren't just sitting around in Heaven, doing nothing, waiting for us to get there. They are eating, drinking, laughing – that is, *celebrating*, with God. To say that we believe in the communion of saints is to say that we believe that some day we, too, will join the party.

We've never been able to describe heaven very well. I don't know anyone who's excited about the cartoon versions of heaven – clouds, harps, and a lot of do-gooders hanging around. And some of the Book of Revelation's pictures of Heaven are downright frightening: multi-winged beasts, fiery cherubim, and a fierce savior.

Here's the problem. How do you describe something that is indescribable—because it's so much more awesome than anything we've ever experienced on earth? The *Biblical writers* drew on visions filled with wild images in an attempt to describe God's power and what it will be like to

stand before him. How do *you* imagine what it's going to be like to finally see God face to face?

One powerful way to think of our “going to Heaven” is like going to a family reunion – but not just any reunion. This is one with relatives and friends and classmates that you actually like – including ones you haven't seen in years – and maybe feared you'd never see again. In that sense, going to Heaven is like going home: we'll finally be united with the people who have shared our lives and loved us. Heaven is a place of perfect communion – or community -- with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we say we believe in the communion of saints we're saying that someday we'll experience “glad Heavenly reunion” with all the saints who've gone before us.

The Christian musician Michael W. Smith put it simply a few decades ago when he sang, “Friends are friends forever, when the Lord's the Lord of them.” He's right. And I'm counting on it. I've got a whole long list of people I'm looking forward to seeing someday. At that top of that list, after Jesus, of course, is my dad, and then Kari's dad, and then my grandparents and then some of the parishioners I've buried. My son, Aaron, is looking forward to it, too. Sometimes my six year old says he can't wait to get to Heaven and see everyone, especially his grandfathers and our late cat, Barney. I tell him he can wait – no matter how long it takes. The instant he gets there all the time he spent waiting will pass away like a dream, and it won't seem like long at all.

But we long for connection with the saints *now*, don't we? Some of you have told me recently of experiences you've had that feel like a visitation from a departed loved one—perhaps a butterfly lighting on a window pane or a deer paying an unexpected visit. These mysterious experiences can mean so much. Wouldn't it be nice if we could schedule them? Or what if we could just visit Heaven once in a while, to check in? Maybe for lunch with our loved ones.

Well, we can't go for lunch, but we *can* join them for supper – the Lord's Supper. The third meaning of “the communion of saints” is that even now the saints on Earth can connect with the saints in Heaven. It happens at this table. Somehow when we're dining together here we're also eating with the saints in light. Sure, our *bodies* may be stuck here, but our *spirits* are not limited by time or space. If, during the Lord's Supper, we are spiritually

connected with Jesus in Heaven, then doesn't it make sense that we are also spiritually connected with all those who see Jesus face to face in Heaven everyday? When we say that we believe in the communion of saints we're saying that my father and your grandparents and Jennifer Williams and Mary Ann Cox and Jean Johnson and all the saints who've gone before us are as much a part of this meal as is Jesus himself. We will soon commune with the saints at this table in a very real way.

In fact, we can connect with the saints no matter where we are – in church, home alone, even in our cars – all we have to do is sing. Revelation tells us that the saints in Heaven never cease to sing God's praises (Rev. 4:8).

A friend of mine was telling me the other day of a memory he had of riding with his dad in an old beat-up pick up truck. It was one of those epic journeys across hundreds of miles of nowhere. He was just out of college but his dad was already nearing retirement. All they could get on the truck radio was a classical music station, and it must have been around Christmas because they were playing Handel's *Messiah*. Neither of them could sing but they were bored and stir crazy from hours in the truck together so they started humming along, "mm-mm-mm-hmm." And then they started singing, "Hallelujah," first one and then both of them. Soon they were laughing so hard they could barely stand it. It's one of my friend's fondest memories of time with his dad, who died a few years later. And now whenever the Hallelujah chorus comes on my friend starts singing because he knows his father in Heaven is singing too and in that moment father and son are members of one heavenly choir that spans heaven and earth. When we sing God's praises on earth we're joining an anthem in Heaven that's already in progress.

In a few moments we're going to sing a great song of praise to God for all the saints who have blessed our lives. As we sing it, listen carefully not just to the voices of the saints we can see around us – but also for the voices of saints in heaven joining the chorus. Imagine your loved ones standing by you, singing with you. When we sing God's praises we never sing alone.

And then during our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving there will be a time when Jennifer and I read the names of people of faith who've died in the past year. When that list ends I encourage you to silently offer thanks to

God for all the saints, alive with us or alive with Christ, who have blessed our lives. Amen.

Dear Friend,

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