

“AS WE BELIEVE, SO WE SING:  
VI - ‘I BELIEVE IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS’”

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I Corinthians 12:4-13

Matthew 5:1-16

Well, here we are in week six of this sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, with only two more to go after today. I've had a good time working on these sermons and offering them, and I have especially enjoyed hearing your comments about them. Last week, especially, was fascinating. If you weren't here, or, even if you were, and might have forgotten, the phrase we explored was "I believe in the holy catholic church." And man, were there lots of comments! It was absolutely amazing the variety of experiences we've had with that phrase over the years. And I'm especially glad that those of you who confessed to never saying that line in the creed can now say it with wild abandon! "I believe in the holy catholic church!"

As we begin to uncover this week's phrase, "I believe in the communion of saints," I have to say, much as I did last week, that this phrase too has been widely misunderstood over the years, and understandably so. First off - the word communion makes people think right away of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. And then they get hung up on the word saints.

Actually, the word communion in this phrase means fellowship or community, people in "common" or in "union" with one another. And the saints are probably not who you think they are - they're not Peter, and Mary, and Paul, and so on, and they're not holy people who have died and are at home in heaven with God (although all of those I've mentioned are in the communion of saints). The saints in this phrase are **all** people who have believed and do believe in Jesus as Lord of their lives and Savior of the world.

So, guess what? You are a saint! And you are a saint! And you too! Now while you may find that hard to handle, all we need to do is turn to Paul's writings in the New Testament and found out that that's exactly how he defines the word saints - those who believe in Jesus.

So the communion of saints is the fellowship, the community of all who believe in Jesus. In some ways, it's an even broader statement of belief than was last Sunday's, because there are indeed saints, those who believe in Jesus, who are not actively part of a church.

So how about that? How do you feel about being called a saint? I would imagine not one of you here have ever described yourself in that way. You know, when you're in a meeting or a group, and they ask you to say a few words about yourself . . . I don't ever remember standing up and saying, "My name is Karen Bunnell, and I'm a saint." No surprise, there, huh?

We're a little uncomfortable thinking of ourselves as saints, because we do, in fact, think people like Peter and Paul, and Mother Teresa, and Joan of Arc are the real saints. The spiritual super-heroes. The ones that went above and beyond the call of duty. The ones who took incredible risks, and gave their all. They're the saints, right?

We could never be like them, could we? Why, they're so far above us we can't even try to be like them! Yet, we forget that even those saints were human, just like us. When it comes down to it, they were simply people who believed in Jesus and relied on His grace. And they had feet of clay, just like we do. Peter was an incredible disciple, but he was also the one who was impulsive and impetuous, sometimes putting his foot in his mouth, and of course, he denied knowing Jesus three times.

And Paul, that saint, didn't start out that way - far from it. He spent all of his energy trying to wipe out the church. He was the greatest persecutor the church had ever known, until that moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus.

And while we don't know all the details of the lives of Mother Teresa and Joan of Arc, we do know that they were human, so, in some ways, they were just like us.

So, you'd better get comfortable with being called a saint, because that's exactly what you are, if you have received Jesus as the Lord of your life. You are a saint.

And you are blessed to be a part of a community - a communion of saints - that spans the ages, and covers the world, and numbers more than we can count. And the reason it's important that we say this phrase in the creed is that it reminds us, and we affirm, that we are not alone, we are never alone on this journey of faith and life. It's not just us and God, it's us and God and a whole lot of others.

A whole lot of others, who believe what we believe, who are trying to live the lives we are trying to live, who strive to be the kind of disciples we strive to be, who seek to reach out in service and witness to the world as we do. We're in it together - the communion of saints. As one person put it so beautifully, "Because we belong

to Jesus, we belong to one another.” (On-line, “The Communion of Saints”) What strength and comfort there is in knowing that, especially in our world that isolates people. “Because we belong to Jesus, we belong to one another.”

And belonging to each other, and being in community with each other, enables us to live our lives and face whatever we have to face knowing that we never do it alone. Ever! We are part of a community - the communion of saints.

I hope you’ve felt the strength of that in your own life. I know I have. I’ve told you before how homesick I was when I went away to college - to Salisbury, lo those many years ago. And I told you how one weekend when I was sobbing on the phone with my mother, she encouraged me to go to church, and sobbing I replied, “but I don’t know anybody there.” And she said, “Yes, you do.” She was telling me, in her own way, about the communion of saints - people who, although I did not know their names or faces, were my brothers and sisters in Christ. They would be there, just as surely as Christ would be there.

And you know, I did go, and the communion of saints was there for me, and I didn’t feel so lonely and afraid anymore.

How have you experienced the communion of saints in your life? I know that there are some children in an orphanage in the Congo right now who are getting some new school uniforms because the children in our church gave their offering for that during Vacation Bible School. Chances are good that none of them will ever meet face to face, but it almost doesn’t matter, because they are a part of the communion of saints - the children in the Congo know that someone cares, and our children know they made a difference in some hurting lives - and all of them are connected forever in a wonderful way.

And I have a feeling I could ask several members of our congregation who are serving in the military in far-away places about the communion of saints and they could explain it well - because they feel it everyday. They know the love that binds them to us, the care that reaches out to them, the prayers that continually go to God for them. I hope that when they stand on the battlefield they feel our presence with them, just as we feel their presence with us as we live each day in safety.

And I know I could ask any number of you about your experience being a part of the communion of saints, and I would hear about how the saints around you helped carry you through a difficult time, or encouraged you when you stepped out in faith, or celebrated with you at a joyous time, or held your hand when your heart was broken, or helped lead you to that place where you became a saint, when you said yes to Jesus.

The communion of saints - it is an awesome thing of which to be a part - an awesome, and awe-inspiring thing - a blessing for us all.

And friends, if all we had was each other, if all the saints in our lives were those in the world today, that would be enough. But the communion of saints is even more than that, because it includes all who have ever believed in Jesus - ever. It includes those who have gone on before us.

When we say we believe in the communion of saints, we say that we know that those who have gone on before us are still a part of us. Those they have gone from our sight, they have not gone from our midst. A pastor named Richard Crocker put it so beautifully when he said this:

“When we gather around a table, whether it be a thanksgiving table or a communion table or a kitchen table, we are in a circle of holiness, a circle of inclusion, a circle of hope. That circle is never more real than when it has been broken - when someone is missing because they have died or gone away. The bond we feel with that person gives us a clue that physical presence is not the only kind. We feel a sense of communion that leads us to hope for a circle that will never be unbroken. And that whole circle is what we call the communion of saints.”  
(On-line, Dartmouth College, Tucker Foundation, “The Holy Catholic Church,” Chaplain Richard Crocker, Nov. 11, 2004)

So while we worship together here, they worship with us before the throne of God in heaven. And while we feast at the table of our Lord here on earth, they feast at the heavenly banquet in heaven. As we sing praises, so their voices fill the heavenly chorus!

The circle is unbroken - the communion of saints spans all times and places. We are one in Christ Jesus, we are one with each other - we are never alone. We are part of a glorious communion of saints - created by God, saved by Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

So I want to close with what was a powerful reminder for me of the communion of saints. It happened ten years ago, but it's fresh in my mind because I was talking about it the other night with my Beginnings group. Ten years ago, I went to Germany, to see the passion play at Oberammergau. Let me tell you a little bit about it.

Back in the middle ages, during the plague that wiped out so many, many people, the people in the little village of Oberammergau were spared. So grateful were they, that they made a pledge to God, that every ten years they would put on a play depicting the Lord's passion as a witness to the world of God's saving power.

And so they have done every ten years since then!

It's an incredible production. All of the people of the town take part in it, hundreds and hundreds of people! It is about eight hours long, so when we went, the play started early in the morning, then we had a break for lunch and walking around the town, and then we came back for the last four hours.

Now, mind you, the entire production is in German. And it's in an outdoor amphitheater. It completely sells out every time they do it, so if you want to go to see it in 2020 for instance, you need to get your tickets in about 2018 or so. People come from all over the world to see it. So it's an incredible audience of which to be a part. You never know who will be sitting next to you, and what language they will speak. And you'll all sitting there watching a play completely in German, which 99% of our group did not speak!

But I want to tell you something, it didn't matter. Because all of us knew the story, and we watched it played out before us - and the power of the passion of Christ poured over us. It was incredible. I remember during the crucifixion scene the woman next to me who was from Sweden, I think, sobbing out loud. It was an incredibly powerful, faith-filled moment.

And it was a moment when I felt perhaps more clearly than I ever did in my life the phrase "I believe in the communion of saints." A more diverse group of believers I had never seen, and yet our hearts were one in love with Jesus.

Friends, we are a part of the communion of saints - saints who have gone on, saints here with us. What a gift from God! We are never, ever alone.

Indeed, we believe in the communion of saints, and all we can say, is "thank you, Lord, thank you."

Amen.