

COMMUNING WITH THE SAINTS

Revelation 7:9-17

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Matthew 5:1-12

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TEXT: “O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia!” Verse from *For All the Saints*, -William W. How

PURPOSE: To offer encouragement in our efforts to be Christ’s faithful Church in our time from the assurance that the saints of old are with us, enriching our commitment to embody the gospel with our witness in word and action.

“I believe in the communion of saints.” So says one of the articles of the Apostle’s Creed, one of the earliest expressions of the content of Christian Faith. This belief may be one of the most desired, as well as one of the most audacious, statements of faith in any of our creeds. It claims that there is one church, a community of saints, including the church on earth and the church in heaven, what theologians call the “Church Militant” - that’s us, working for the gospel – and the “Church Triumphant” – that’s them, who from their labors rest. I favor the language in hymn which closes our worship this morning, which sings, “O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.” In some way totally beyond our ability to understand or describe, our earthbound lives are intimately entwined with the faithful who have gone to glory.

I have long been blessed with the image of the saints who have passed from life to life being present with us in our worship. In churches whose worship space has rafters, I like to imagine them parked up there, singing with us, rooting for us, calling for us to stretch ourselves to meet the urgency of our times, as they met the challenges they faced in their times. Here in this space, I imagine them filling the pews which have been tied off to encourage social distancing in the pandemic.

Belief in the communion of saints involves identifying ourselves as saints. It’s not about us mortals who aren’t saints getting to commune with the saints who have already received the inheritance of eternal life. It is that both the heavenly and the earthly expressions of church are comprised of saints. I don’t recall any Christian I’ve known being comfortable with being called a saint. The word connotes more purity, more holiness, more commitment than we think we have. We’re more likely to think of ourselves as Christians under construction, at best, as works in progress, at worst, as slackers in our practice of faith, better numbered among those who, in Paul’s words, “have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23) than described as a saint, right up there with Peter and Paul and Polycarp. Yes, there is a saint named Polycarp. Look him up. He was so holy that, when he was being burned at the stake, the fire did not consume him, and his executioners had to stab him to death.

But Paul addressed the members of the churches to which he wrote as “saints,” and it’s pretty clear that he used that word to describe mortal Christians who have accepted Christ as their savior and become part of the Church which is his body in the world. I can’t find any use of the word “saints” in the Bible to refer to the faithful ones whose lives are complete with God. As far as the Bible seems to be concerned, we mortal Christians are the only saints there are. Our faith has evolved to imagine the congregation of the saints to include the saints who who have died and now live with God in glory. But it never gave up on recognizing the mortal followers of Jesus as saints.

That delightful children’s song we sang in response to the reading of the names of our personal saints says this best: “The world is full of living saints who choose to do God’s will. You can meet them at school, on the road, or at sea, in a church, in a train, in a shop, or at tea: for the saints are folk like you and like me, and I mean to be one, too.”

What does it take to be a saint? It certainly doesn’t require religious and moral perfection. Think of the people you hold as your personal saints. Were they perfect in every way? Probably not. Did they think of themselves as somehow ‘holier than thou’? I doubt it. Saintliness has no room for spiritual pride. Saintliness has much more to do with surrendering our lives to the grace of God than it has to do with collecting a list of religious merit badges. It has to do with allowing God to use us to accomplish God’s extraordinary purposes while we live our ordinary lives with our ordinary responsibilities. It has to do with trust and humility, trust that God has a purpose for us, even if we have no idea what that purpose might be, and humble recognition that it’s not about what we accomplish, but about what God accomplishes through us. It has to do, not with one person being singled out as especially faithful, but with belonging to a community of people who are called to be God’s saints right here, right now.

So the communion *of* saints unites us in one church, on earth and in heaven, brought into being by Jesus himself and sustained through the action of the Holy Spirit. The communion of saints invites us to think of ourselves no less than those who have gone before as people whom God has sanctified by grace, people whom God has made to be the means by which God’s light shines in the world. What about communing *with* the saints? Today, as on the first Sunday of every month, we

are celebrating the sacrament of holy communion. I have long been appreciative of the connections which our October and November communion services celebrate. The first Sunday in October is World Communion Sunday, when we know ourselves to be communing with Christians in every place. The first Sunday in November, when it celebrates All Saints Day, affirms that we are celebrating communion with Christians of every time. Imagining our table extending in both directions fills me with awe and courage, because I believe those saints of every time and place are encouraging us to be the faithful church for our time, and for our place.

That's a wonderful image, but I think that communing with the saints is much more intimate than that. One of the most precious aspects of my ministry has always been sharing communion with someone who isn't able to be in the gathered community. I have a little box which holds a few communion cups, a small bottle for the grape juice, and a container for the bread. In someone's home, or in their room in a hospital or nursing home, I set up the elements and share this simple, sacred meal with a dearly beloved person. As I open my little box, the mood shifts. Whatever we'd been talking about beforehand slips away. An attentiveness, a holiness, envelops us. All is well. We experience an intimacy which feels provided, not caused by us, but given to us. More potently than what happens here when we share the bread and cup, it seems as if the sacrament transports the two of us, just for a moment, to a dimension where worry, and grief, and even the prospect of death are set aside, and all that remains is Presence, the presence of Jesus, who shares himself through the bread and the drink. That, for me, more than that grander image of communing with the whole company of the saints, is what I imagine when I imagine communing with the saints. Just one saint at a time, thank you; that's more than enough.

I have clear memories of offering private communion both to Claire and to Elsa. I recall clearing a space on their bedside table so that I could set it as the table of our Lord. I recall how, as that happened, all that was troubling us about their situation was gently set aside, so that room was made for the spiritual nourishment God was offering. Perhaps I didn't think of that sharing as communing with a saint at the time, but looking back, that is the way I came to understand it.

However, this sacramental intimacy is not only about comfort. It also is about challenge. The saints who have found their place in the Church Triumphant may know better than us how crucial it is for us to be courageously faithful in our time, in

this, the weirdest of times. Indeed, to have them share the communion meal with us is an extraordinarily precious gift. But their communing with us carries a larger purpose. If they have any awareness of the situation we are living in, they surely realize how important it is for the saints of God to be doing the work God wants us to be doing.

I know that Claire and Elsa challenged me. They challenged me to be authentic in my relationship with them, but also, to work for the vitality of this church, the church they loved. My list of saints includes both of my grandmothers and my father, each of whom challenged me to be the best person I could be. Dad's favorite farewell was "Do it good, whatever it is." That's a challenge which has stuck with me. My personal list of saints also includes a few famous people. It includes Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, who was gunned down as he presided over a communion service in 1980 because of his commitment to justice for the poor people of his country. It includes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor in Germany who resisted Nazism and eventually was hanged for his opposition to the Reich. Both of these men challenge me to practice a faith which engages with the social and political issues of my time, to take the side of the oppressed, of the victims of state-sponsored violence, and to denounce ideologies which pretend to be Christian, but which in fact are the opposite of what Jesus lived for, and died for. I have nowhere near the courageous faith exemplified in the sacrificial lives of Oscar and Dietrich, but the witness of their lives certainly challenges me in these times, which are so perilous for poor people, so ideologically fractured, and so full of opportunity to stand for true justice and real mercy.

The Gospel text assigned to All Saints Day is the passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount known as "The Beatitudes." The nine kinds of people whom Jesus called "blessed" are remarkably contrary to what our dominant culture would consider to be blessed. The culture doesn't think that people who mourn, or who are merciful, or who are persecuted for righteousness' sake to be blessed. The culture wants us to be hungry for the newest shiny thing, not for righteousness. The culture assumes that the brutish, not the meek, will inherit the earth. All Saints Day presents us with people who were blessed with the blessings of the Beatitudes. And, it invites us not only to be blessed by the witness of their lives, but to be a blessing in the world, to live lives which invite others to follow Jesus, which is what saints do. After all, the "saints of God are folk just like you and me," so, God helping, let's all seek to be one, too.