

I BELIEVE IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

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*"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."
Revelation 7:9*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Today we celebrate All Saints day. All Saints Day is actually tomorrow but we're celebrating it today. I want to take advantage of this day to confess that "I believe in the communion of saints".

What is a saint? The word saint means *holy one* or *one who has been set apart by God for a purpose*. The New Testament refers to all Christians as *saints* or *holy ones*. If we're a Christian we're a saint, we're holy. That has nothing to do with our personal sanctity. **Think of a saint as an ordinary person like you or me who's been set apart for a particular purpose.** Think of how we set apart bread and wine for the particular purpose of celebrating Holy Communion. When I take communion to shut-ins there's a place in the service where I stretch out my hands over the bread and wine and I say, "Now, in *Christ's* name, I take these Elements to be set apart by prayer and thanksgiving to the holy use for which He has appointed them." The bread remains bread, but it's set apart to serve a special purpose. In the same way you and I have been set apart to point others to Christ. We remain ordinary people. We remain sinners. We have irritating habits and annoying manners. Sometimes we're down-right mean. But God has set us apart to point others to Christ and to be a sign that Christ is alive in this world.

Our first Scripture reading from the Revelation of St. John shows us a vision of saints in heaven. **John tells us three things about the saints in heaven. First, there are a whole lot of them.** He saw a great multitude, too many to number. Some Christians seem to think the world is so bad that most people will never get to heaven. But John saw God's mercy to be so great, that it's a wonder any are lost. "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea."

John's vision gives us hope that there are far more in heaven than our theology sometimes allows. Our new Study Catechism asks: "Will all human beings be saved?" And the answer is: "No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

The second thing John shows us in his vision of the saints in heaven is their diversity. "From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." His vision reminds me of an experience I had this past summer. Mark and I took a trip to Washington, DC. We got a train in Perryville and arrived at Union Station in Washington DC. And there in Union Station we saw a great multitude from every nation and from all tribes and peoples and languages. Africans with colorful robes. Pakistanis in white gowns and turbans. Orientals in distinctive clothing. Native American Indians. And we overheard different languages. Italian. Polish. German. African dialects. Indian. Chinese. I think that's what heaven's going to be like. Heaven is multi-cultural. The saints in heaven include all sorts and kinds of people - including people you might be surprised to find their. Jesus said that some tax-collectors and prostitutes who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb will enter heaven before a lot of preachers.

And that leads me to the third thing John tells us about the saints in heaven. The saints are not in heaven because they've managed to live a sinless life which no one does; nor because they have worked miracles, which they often do; but because they've washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. That's a poetic way of saying that we're saved by Christ, not by ourselves. We're saved by grace, through faith. We used to sing an old Gospel hymn, "Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you finally trusting in his grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" The saints do not sing their own praises. They sing the praises of God: "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb". Of course we should do all we can to be like Christ - but not in order to earn our salvation or to avoid punishment - but out of gratitude for God's grace that comes to us in Jesus.

Saints didn't die only thousands of years ago.

Hundreds of saints have sat in the Oxford Presbyterian Church over the last 250 years. Farmers, teachers, barbers, politicians, rich people, poor people, policemen and women, shop keepers and factory workers, democrats and republicans, criminals and judges. Some Oxford Presbyterian saints lived to be a hundred and others died at birth. But they were all saints - all saved by God's grace through Jesus Christ. But all the saints are not in heaven. Many saints are still with us. They live in this town. They work along side us. They still fill our pews. "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..."

Last week Scott Rhodewalt, who grew up in our church, attended the Russian Choir Concert. After the service I was talking with him. He noticed how the church sanctuary had been reconfigured from what it had been before the fire. He said, "I think I was sitting tonight just about where the old grand piano use to be in the old church." And he spoke about the saints who sat in the pews with him. Some of them are still living. Some have died.

That made me think of one feature of the old church that I miss most. I miss the names of the people memorialized in the stained glass windows and on the walls. I use to ask people, "Who are these? Where did they come from?" Those names reminded me of the communion of saints. I imagine the people who wore those names looking down from a balcony in heaven, worshipping with us, cheering us on as we go through our own trials and tribulations. I hope that one day plaques will be placed on the pews with the names of people memorialized. And I hope one day your grandchildren will bring their own children into this sanctuary and say, "Look, there's where grandmother worshiped." I think it's important for us to discover who these saints are and where they came from.

Norman Maclean tells the story of his childhood in his book, *A River Runs Through It* - The story of his Scots Presbyterian Father and mother and his brother growing up in Montana where they use to fly fish in the Big Blackfoot River. At the end of his book Maclean writes, "Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach

out to them.” I know what he means. I still reach out because I believe in the Communion of Saints.

One of the things I want to do is provide times for us to tell stories of the saints who’ve sat in this church. I’d like to have some covered dish suppers. Get as many people here as possible along with the children. I’d like to encourage us to tell stories about the everyday saints who have worshipped here over the past 250 years. Before it’s too late, have young people interview some of our oldest members - who were some people who told you about Jesus? Who were some people in whom you saw Christ? If we could hear some of their stories, the Holy Spirit would come upon our church in ways we might not expect.

Finally, know that we too have been invited to join that innumerable multitude of saints. We too must pass through trials and tribulations on our way to the heavenly city. Make sure we wash our sin-stained robes in the blood of the Lamb. Their are palms of victory for us to wave. Their are songs of praise we can sing now to God and to the Lamb. Amen.