

The Communion of Saints

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Ephesians 1:11-23

¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. ¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who

believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 6:20-31

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. ²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets. ²⁷ “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; ²⁸ bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Years ago, when I was one of the pastors at a congregation in northern Indiana, that church engaged in a multi-year conversation about who God was calling us to be in the world. It included church wide conversations around how God speaks to us today, how we discern the gifts within our membership and the greatest needs within our surrounding community; how we leverage our financial and human assets to be of good use in the world, and how we might articulate who we were as a church so that people looking for a new church community would understand our mission and vision. Even though that church wasn't in a pastoral transition at that moment, this is often the work that a church does in times of transition. It will be the work that this congregation is about to enter as we all begin this interim season together in the months ahead.

One of the ways that we did that work at the time was to engage in a church wide study and reflection on the teachings of Jesus found in his Sermon on the Mount - and the Lukan version that we just heard from, often referred to as his Sermon on the Plain. Most scholars agree that it is unlikely that Jesus actually offered up this extended sermon in one singular moment of teaching; instead, it is a collection of a significant amount of his teachings all knit together on community, prayer, the law, and the coming Kingdom of God.

Including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, it also includes the very heart of Jesus' ethical teachings - pointed and challenging expectations for how Christians are called to be and behave differently in the world: to return hatred with acts of kindness, mistreatment with charity, and even abuse with deeds of mercy. If we were trying to figure out who we were as a Church, certainly immersing ourselves in the essential teachings of Jesus

would spark conversation, questions, and maybe even a vision for who God was calling us to be.

In one of those Bible studies, likely one where we were discussing the challenge of doing things like loving one's enemy, turning the other cheek, praying for those who persecute us, not to judge others, and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, a participant, half in jest pondered how many of these rules one needed to follow in order to get into Heaven. I also asked, half in jest, how many of these rules can you choose to ignore and still consider yourself a Christian?

In a way, we were both speaking to a diminished understanding of what it means to be counted as a part of the Body of Christ here on earth and counted among the communion of Saints in Heaven.

Several years ago, Theologian Ben Meyers turned a series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed, another fraught litmus test for Christian identity, into a small book in which he poetically and lovingly expands our understanding of the creed and the ideas included in it - no reflection in it is more beautiful than his description of the Communion of Saints. He writes:

“Becoming a Christian is not really about institutional membership or about adopting a system of ideas. To become a Christian is to be included in the circle of Jesus' followers. I am washed with the same bath that Jesus and all his followers have had. I get to share the same meal that Jesus shared with his followers. Four of Jesus' followers left written records of what he said and what he was like, and I get to spend my life continually pondering those four accounts. I read them not because I am studying ideas about Jesus, but because I am studying him. I want everything in my

life, right down to the smallest and most disappointing details, to enter somehow into communion with the life of Jesus.

I share the holy bath and the holy meal, and I read the holy stories because I am seeking Jesus, but when I do these things, I am also seeking myself. I want to find myself among the circle of Jesus' followers. I want to be wherever Jesus is - and he is in the company of his friends. I want my life's small story to be tucked into the folds of Jesus' story.

When this happens, my life acquires a meaning beyond itself. I begin to see myself as part of a great company, an ever-widening circle of people who have handed their lives over to the pattern of Jesus' life. This great company of disciples sing with one voice one unceasing prayer. The Gospel of John ends by telling us that it has offered only a glimpse of Jesus. If everything Jesus did was written down, the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Perhaps at the end of the age, the total gospel will be read out and will be found to contain everything every life every story every human grief and joy all included as episodes in the one great infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends.”¹

When the Bible calls believers “the saints,” as we also just heard from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it isn’t singling out a few, especially holy individuals, or those who have perfected faith and faithfulness. It’s describing the whole community of Christians together in all of our complicated glory. We are called “saints” not because of what we have

¹ Ben Meyers, *The Apostle’s Creed*,

done, the boxes we have checked, or the right things we have believed, but because we belong to God and to one another in the body of Christ.

Holiness is not a personal achievement—it's a shared identity. We are made holy because God has chosen and gathered us, through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. That calling gives our lives purpose and direction. As saints, we are invited to live in ways that reflect God's love—through compassion, integrity, and justice. By at least attempting to live into Jesus' compelling and challenging teachings that are as familiar as the Golden Rule and as counter-cultural as loving one's enemies.

This community of saints is shaped by hope. We trust in God's ultimate victory over all that harms or destroys, a victory already revealed in Christ's resurrection. And because the Communion of Saints includes people of every time and place, it is a radically inclusive community—open to all whom God calls, without distinction of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

This morning, as is our tradition and the tradition of most Christian communities, we will remember the names of those from our congregation who have joined the church triumphant in this year, giving thanks for the ways that they have been and continue to be valued members of the Communion Saints. And today we count ourselves among them as well.

We give thanks to God, we seek ourselves in the folds of Jesus' story, and we join our voices in song with all of the saints and angels and all the faithful of every time and place as a part of this holy people—a living, diverse, and hopeful community bound together in God's love. Amen.