The Apostles’ Creed, A Lover’s Quarrel: The Communion of Saints

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Hebrews 12:1-2, II Corinthians 13:11-13

As was mentioned earlier this morning, today is our welcome back Sunday. August is over, school has started again, schedules are getting busy back at work after summer slowdowns, and we begin another program year here at Immanuel. Today we begin the year with two sorts of meals—a picnic after service and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper or, as we also call it, communion, during it.

I’ve been preaching through the summer on the Apostles’ Creed. Over the past few months, I’ve unpacked its various affirmations, wrestled with some of them, and looked to how we might understand and embrace them in modern context, asking what those affirmations, viewed through the lens of scripture, might mean for us today.

It seems fortuitous, today being a communion Sunday, that we are cued up to deal with what it means to say that we believe in “the communion of saints”. Two passages in particular come to mind with regard to that idea. The first is from the 12th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, which scholars believe was essentially a sermon, a sermon preached to a community of believers facing persecution on account of their faith. The author of that sermon spends much of the 11th chapter pointing to those who have gone before, recalling the example they provided and the hardships they had to face, as they sought to be faithful to the God whose presence Jesus came to embody. He concludes that litany of examples with these words.

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, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Our second passage moves from talking about those who have gone before to those who are very much with us physically in the here and now. As I read the final three verses of Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, notice his instructions to them as they live in community, and his use of the word “saints.” When Paul uses the word saint in his letters, he’s not talking about deceased people. He’s talking about people who are very much physically alive—imperfect people trying in community to do their best to live out faith in their own context. Listen now for God’s word to you and me in II Corinthians 13, verses 11-13.

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

What does it mean to say that we believe in the Communion of Saints? And what difference does that make? Perhaps it’s best if we start with what the word saint means.

For the longest time, probably at least until I went to seminary, when I heard the word saint, I thought of it primarily in one of two ways. Either as Saint with a big S: St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Mary, St. Bridget, St. Teresa, St. Patrick, giants of the faith whom the Roman Catholic Church had canonized and who stood out as examples of how to live faithfully. You know, those saints, dead and gone, that churches and cities are been named after. (By the way, I saw this wonderful picture on the Internet recently. It’s the brick wall of a church with lettering on it that was intended to say, Saint Peter’s Church. But the S had fallen off. So now it says, “Aint Peter’s Church!”)

There were Saints with a big S, but also saints with a small s. Those were the people who live among us whose actions stood out as particularly patient, compassionate, or generous. “She’s a real saint,” I’d think to myself. “The way she hangs in there with that difficult person in her life.” “He’s a real saint,” I’d think, “The way he gives his time and money so generously to those in need.”

Those are two perfectly acceptable ways of thinking about what it means to be a saint, of course.

The word saints, hagioi in Greek, (so the study of saints is hagiography), literally means holy ones. Holy ones. The ones who are set apart by God for the work of God’s reign. And the saints with a big S and saints with a small s were and are examples of that. They are part of our cloud of witnesses to be sure. {Earlier in the service, we’d filled in clouds with names of people living and dead who had helped shape our faith in positive ways).

Saints are holy ones. But that word holy has unfortunate connotations. Just like the word righteous is often understood in light of the self-righteous, holy often gets understood in light of the game of holier than thou. You know that game. It’s when a person thinks to him or herself, I’m better at practicing my faith than that person over there.

Thinking of saints as holy ones can also lead us to put someone on some sort of pedestal of perfection. But the longer I live, the more I understand that aside perhaps from Jesus, there is no perfect person. The more you idealize someone the more you are getting set up for a fall. So perhaps we need take the word saint off of its pedestal. Because, after all, the Apostle Paul used the word saints to refer to the people in the congregations he served, and if you read his letters at all carefully, you know he wasn’t writing to people who were perfect. He wasn’t writing to people who had it all figured out, who never failed or stumbled.

That’s why I like the notion I read somewhere that a saint is like stained glass. A saint is a person that the light shines through. Not all the time, not in each and every circumstance. But somehow, filtered through the multi-colored fragments of a life lived out in a world that is complex and complicated, where atrocities are committed in Syria, and difficult decisions must be made in Washington and the international community, world where feelings get hurt, and bodies give out, and hearts and souls get wounded, the Light of God’s Love shines through. The light shines through the multicolored fragments of life in reconciliation, in hospitality, in challenge and comfort. It
shines through people who stand for justice and mercy. It shines in people who do the right thing, the kind thing. But none of those people gets it right all the time.

Leonard Cohen, that great Jewish songwriter, penned these marvelous lines:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There are cracks in everything
That’s how the light gets in!

If a saint is NOT a person who gets it right every time, not a person who is utterly without flaw, but a person through whom the light of love can and does shine through, sometimes exquisitely, but often imperfectly, then you and I can qualify for that club. Or should I say, community? Or better yet, communion? Which means, “to be in union with.”

To say that we believe in the communion of saints is to say that we are in union (together with them, whether we always like that or not and whether we always like them or not), with everyone else through whom the light shines—or through whom the light has ever shined, or ever will shine. Those who are living and those who are dead but somehow live still, and in some way live in us.

And those of who have passed on, whether we idealize them or not, had their flaws, too. I think of Mother Teresa with her doubts, and her occasionally grumpy disposition. I think of my Grandpa Eickstaedt, who had a temper, but as an elder in his Presbyterian church in Illinois was so close to the pastor that when he died, at 49, in 1963, the pastor could not bring himself to do the service. I think of my Grandmother Carlson, who was a wonderful woman, a nurse in her small town, a woman who showed great hospitality to those in need, but was almost impossible to live with for a week or two every year in the hottest part of the summer in those days before air conditioning.

No one is without flaw. There’s a GIF going around right now that features Mr. Rogers, that Presbyterian minister whose children show Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood shaped so many lives of people of my generation for the better. If there was ever a Presbyterian Saint with a big S, it would be Fred Rogers. Anyway, this GIF shows him with his middle finger in the air. It turns out that the image was pulled out of context, from an episode where he was teaching children a song where you point with different fingers. But it does make you think. Even Mr. Rogers probably had times when he was angry, when he wasn’t at his best, when he fell short.

Frederick Buechner speaks of the communion of saints in words that have been helpful to more than one of us here after we’ve said goodbye to a loved one too early. He speaks not so much of their flaws, but of how their life continues in us and beyond us:

“How they do live on, these giants of our childhood, and how well they manage to take even death in their stride, because although death can put an end to their life, it cannot put an end to our relationship with them. Whatever else or however else they may have come to life in the life that is in us. Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer; it is a looking back to another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still. The people we loved. The people who taught us things. Dead and gone thought they may be, as we
come to understand them in new ways, it is as though they come to understand us—and through them we come to understand ourselves—in new ways, too. Who knows what “the communion of saints” means, but surely it means more than that we are all of us haunted by ghosts, because they are not ghosts, these people we once knew, not just echoes of voices that have years since ceased to speak, but saints in the sense that through them something of the power and richness of life not only touched us once long ago, but continues to touch us.”

However our being in union with those who have passed from the life, recognizing that they continue to live on in us and in God in some enduring way, is just one aspect of the communion of saints. Often, the more difficult aspect of the communion of saints is to think of our connection and union with those with whom we live in the here and now.

In that regard, I was drawn to a piece from the Episcopalian Sara Miles’ memoir, Take This Bread. Miles grew up in an atheist family, and began to come to faith after dropping in on an Episcopal church service in San Francisco and receiving communion there. Eventually, she herself became a person who distributed it (and she now runs a food pantry in San Francisco).

Miles writes: What happened once I started distributing communion was the truly disturbing, dreadful realization about Christianity: You can’t be a Christian by yourself....Sooner or later, if I kept participating in communion, I’d have to swallow the fact of my connection with all other people, without exception....I wasn’t getting [communion] because I was special. I certainly didn’t get to pick who else was good enough, holy enough, deserving enough, to receive it. It wasn’t a private meal. The bread on that Table had to be shared with everyone in order for me to really taste it....I was going to get communion, whether I wanted it or not, with people I didn’t necessarily like. People I didn’t choose. People such as my parents or the strangers who fed me: the people God chose for me.

For me, to believe in the communion of saints means acknowledging our connection with the whole world, people I know and people I’ve never met, people I like and people I struggle to love. When we come to the table, we celebrate that we are in union with them all. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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i Leonard Cohen made these lyrics famous in his song “Anthem”. For his description of the lines and what they mean, see this excerpt from an interview: http://www.leonardcohen-prologues.com/anthem.htm


iii Sara Miles, Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion (New York, Ballantine, 2007). The prologue of the book will give you a great sense of her sense of the communion of saints as well. It’s a marvelous book.