

St. Paul, Minnesota – July 2, 2017
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Hebrews 11:8-16; Hebrews 11:32-40
A Sermon by John M. Miller

Text – These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. – Hebrews 11:13

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Nobody knows for certain exactly when or where the Apostles Creed was first adopted by the Early Church. Whenever it was, it came into wide usage by no later than the fifth century. That almost certainly suggests it was not actually composed by any of the twelve apostles.

In its last declaratory sentence, the Apostle Creed says this: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; *the communion of saints*, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” It is only on the four words in the center of that credal statement, “the communion of saints,” that we shall be concentrating this morning.

The word “saints” has long been a problematic one to both Catholics and Protestants alike. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church has had a process for naming particular saints, such as St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Joan of Arc, St. Ignatius Loyola, and so on. Without going into the particulars, these individuals are believed to have been uniquely exemplary in matters of faith and righteousness. The word “saint” comes from a Latin root which means “holy” (*sanctus*), and unfortunately in the popular mind, that eventually came to mean “extraordinarily holy.” Further, official Roman Catholic saints must have miracles associated with prayers offered to them. Protestants aren’t supposed to pray to anybody except God or maybe Jesus, so that is definitely not the kind of saints this sermon will be about.

In the Bible, the words “saint” or “saints” do not connote that specialized understanding of sanctity or holiness. In scripture, these words appear in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, in the Psalms we see these verses: “As for the saints of the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight” (16:3). There God suggests that saints are special in His sight, but not to the degree that the popular notion of sanctity elevates those we think of as saints. “Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints,” Psalm 30 proclaims, “and give thanks to his holy name” (30:4). There it would appear that anyone in Israel was a saint, and that all were capable of singing praises to God. “Love the Lord, all you his saints!” Psalm 31 says (v.23). We see no hint that saints have any particular kind of righteousness at all. Instead, they are simply Israelites who show their own individual love for God. Psalm 34:9: “O fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no want!” And, as God’s saints are loyal to God, so God is loyal to the saints. “For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints,” we are told in Psalm 37:28. In addition, the words “saint” or “saints” are even more prevalent in the Greek scriptures, the New Testament, than in the Old Testament. The Bible is filled with saints!

One need not be unusually virtuous to be included among the saints. We need only to be faithful to God in our own unique way. All those who consider themselves part of the community of faith are saints. *The community of faith is, in fact, equivalent to the communion of saints.* They are one and the same. Are you a church member? You are a saint. Do you see yourself to be part of the holy catholic Church, whether or not you technically are on any congregation’s membership role anywhere? You are a saint. Are you someone who cannot imagine your life without your own recognition of a connection to God and Jesus Christ? If so, you definitely are a

saint. God collects multitudes of people into the communion of saints who might think they are the last people who should be numbered among God's saints.

We correctly imagine that people from whose lips an unkind word would never emerge are saints, but people who consistently use naughty words every other sentence and yet are giants in worthy community activities are also saints. The one who seems like the meanest and also the wealthiest man in town may also be the one who has anonymously been providing a monthly income to the widow of a young policeman killed in the line of duty who had two small children whom he read about in the newspaper a few years ago. He is a saint. To repeat, being a saint does not require anyone to be extraordinarily holy or righteous. Ordinary holiness will suffice. And most if not all of us are holy in an ordinary way, simply because we were all born children of God. Because we are born, we all have a divinely-engendered measure of holiness within us. Thus it could be argued that everyone is a saint, although many might strongly disagree.

Probably by the early medieval period, the Church began referring to its saints in two categories, as "the Church Militant" and "the Church Triumphant." It was never clear to me why those particular words were chosen, but they were. However, it was largely unfortunate imagery. Nevertheless, it meant that the Church Militant was the *earthly* Church, while the Church Triumphant consisted of all God's saints who were in *heaven*. It seems to me that if they wanted to convey that basic idea, it would have much better had they called the earthly Church "the Church Terrestrial" and the heavenly Church "the Church Celestial." Historically, the Church has been far too militant and not nearly "heavenly" enough. To translate this into the terminology of Jesus, the Church was too little like the kingdom of God and too much like the kingdoms of this world. Christians have been too belligerent through our two millennia of existence. To be truly "triumphant," we should be more "celestial" in our thinking and our behavior, which means we should reflect Jesus' concept of "the kingdom of God" in our everyday existence.

It has been a privilege, an honor, and by now a great surprise for me to be in my fifty-third year as a still-practicing pastor and preacher. When I think about that, I say to myself, "Why are you still at it, for heaven's sake, when most of your pastoral peers are either long retired or dead?" By far the greatest reason for that reality is the existence of the congregation I have been serving for the past fourteen years. The Chapel Without Walls is a small congregation of hardy souls who are willing to put up with me. Therefore I just keep plugging away, trusting that God shall use me in this capacity as long as I have any capacity left which can be used.

In my advanced years increasingly I have come to reflect on the almost numberless saints from the Church Terrestrial I have known and those who now are in the Church Celestial. Because of a fairly rare opportunity which is given to few members of the clergy, I estimate that I have been associated with between fifteen and twenty-five thousand parishioners over the past fifty-two years. It certainly is not that I knew all of those people well; I didn't. But because they were affiliated with the congregations I served, and because I was blessed to be a minister in those congregations, I at least had some degree of contact with that total number.

As such, I long ago discovered that saints come in every conceivable personality type, theological slant, political leaning, sociological class or category, and on every position on the Righteousness Spectrum. As I perceive it, sainthood has far more to do with an ordinary commitment to God and His kingdom on earth, even if individuals never acknowledge it as such, than with always-exemplary righteousness or what we usually think constitutes "sanctity." The saints of my memory and my happy acquaintance have been righteous and roguish, flawed and fearless, thoughtful and thoughtless, self-centered and selfless. It cannot be proclaimed too often:

Sainthood is universal in the universal “holy catholic Church.” Everyone who is any part of any church is a saint. Everyone who believes in God, however fleetingly, is a saint.

To illustrate that, consider the kind of saints I am attempting to describe to some of the saints in the Bible. In terms of what we usually imagine to be sanctity, the saints I have known stand up quite well to some of the scriptural saints. For instance, Lot’s daughters, supposing that there were no more available males anywhere to mate with them after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, sexually seduced their own father by getting him drunk, and they became the progenitors of the Ammonites and Moabites, according to “*holy writ*” (See Genesis 19:24-38). The father of the twelve tribes of Israel, Jacob, cheated his twin brother out of his rightful inheritance, one of the most valuable Hebrew assets in those days (Gen. 25:27-34). Moses, arguably the most important man in the Hebrew Bible, was a murderer (Exodus 2:11-15). David was a rapist and adulterer, all in one horrendously tawdry incident. When he impregnated Bathsheba, it was not an amorous pairing. He was the king, and she was a nameless nobody. He exacted his royal prerogatives upon her (II Samuel 11). When the Romans came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter fled like a frightened rabbit (Matthew 26:36-56). When Stephen was stoned to death, Paul was holding the coats of the rock-chuckers (Acts 7). Every one of these people gained memorable notoriety via the Bible. And you question whether *you’re* a saint?

Nevertheless, all of these people were indispensable participants in the unfolding drama of the biblical communion of saints. Without question, if we are going to be saints (and we are *all* saints), then we should act like saints. But no saints are perpetually “saintly,” in the usual meaning of that word. Furthermore, no sinners are perpetually “saints” as that statement would ordinarily be understood. Yet all of us *are* saints, because we all belong to God.

The Letter to the Hebrews conveys this notion in beautiful, soaring, lovely language. In the eleventh chapter of the epistle we are given a litany of many of the saints of the Bible. It begins with that wonderfully comforting and inspiring first verse, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Then the author launches into his magnificent brief history of people of faith, the saints of God. He declares of them, “These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (11:13).

Fellow Christians, in the Church Terrestrial we are strangers and exiles! Terrestrial saints have no other earthly option! But we are headed for the Church Celestial! God is leading us to the Celestial City, the City of God so eloquently described by St. Augustine so long ago!

Although the thought may seldom have cross our minds, the communion of saints is one of the greatest doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ. We have been in it every moment of our lives, and it shall sustain us until this life is over and our eternal life shall begin. For each of us, we *were* there and we *are* there and eventually we *shall all be there*.

I think back to the saints of my childhood. I was blessed to have born to outstanding parents. I would not trade either of my parents for any other parents I have ever known. My three brothers were marvelous men in their own unique ways. My parents and my two oldest brothers are now in the Church Celestial, while my youngest brother and I await here in the Church Terrestrial our entry to see them at some future, unspecified, holy and happy time.

I think back to friends from my childhood and youth, to my college and seminary classmates, to colleagues in ministry, and to the colorful Christian collage of people I have known in the churches in which it has been my privilege to serve as pastor. The communion of saints is

one of the most comforting concepts ever created by the Church of Jesus Christ. By it and in it and through it we are all sustained for every moment of time, and then into endless eternity.

You can engage in this exercise for yourself. For your own good, for the good of your soul, you *should* engage in your own recollection of your own communion of saints. Think about it. Ponder it. Luxuriate in it. You are a saint, and you have always been surrounded by saints, and in eternal glory you shall live forever with all the saints.

For the last week in June and the first two weeks in July, I have embarked on a warm, nostalgic, personal pastoral sentimental journey. On June 23, I officiated at the graveside committal service in southern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania for my parents-in-law. The ashes of Glen and Norma Seifried were placed in a rural cemetery a few miles from where they both grew up. They both were saints in their own challenging ways, though he would affirm that and she would deny it. Last Sunday I preached in the third congregation I served as a minister in Morristown, New Jersey. Today, I am preaching in the House of Hope Presbyterian Church, where I was the interim pastor in what I believe was by far the most productive sixteen months of ministry I ever spent anywhere. On July 9, I will preach in my fledgling congregation in Bayfield, Wisconsin. And in this nostalgic whirlwind of seeing saints old and new I will also be in Madison, Wisconsin, for the sixtieth anniversary of my high school class graduation. Although my wife Lois is thirteen years younger than I, she decided discretion is the better part of valor, concluding that she might not survive the frenetic pace of this cross-country pastoral marathon, and so participated only in the service in Pennsylvania for her parents.

When we say we “believe in the communion of saints,” we are publicly declaring that we believe in one another. We are saying that we trust one another, that we find our own trust *in* one another. None of us is perfect, or anything close to perfect, but we’re all we have. We realize that we are incapable of making it through life on our own, that without other saints, we are likely to become lost, lonely adrift orphans. One of God’s greatest gifts to us is the communion of saints. Everyone we have ever known, everyone whose life has touched our lives, everyone who has ever lived, is connected to us, because we are *all* saints.

As I reflect on the particular communion of saints I have previously experienced as a pastor for more than half a century, I am struck by the reality that well over half the parishioners with whom I have been associated are now in the Church Celestial. I am not dismayed by that, nor saddened, nor melancholy. Rather I accept it and affirm it. We shall all always be a part of God’s people, whether terrestrial or celestial. The fact that more than half the people I have ever known have died is not *discouraging* but *encouraging*, because I believe that they have gone to an even better form of life than this life, and for most of us terrestrial life has been outstanding.

We shall die in faith, not having fully received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that, *except for one another*, we were strangers and exiles in the earth. But God has prepared for us a celestial communion of the saints, eternal in the heavens. There we shall be with Him and with one another forever. The communion of saints had a beginning, but it shall never have an end.

I sing a song of the saints of God/ patient and brave and true/ Who toiled and fought and lived and died/ For the Lord they loved and knew/ And one was a doctor, and one was a queen/ And one was a shepherdess on the green/ They were all of them saints of God/ And I mean, God helping, to be one too. For all the saints, who from their labors rest/ Who thee by faith before the world confessed/ Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest/ Alleluia, Alleluia!