

I BELIEVE IN MY GREAT FAMILY

Credo Series (Part 6) | John 15:5-8; Hebrews 12:1-2

What do you think of when you hear the phrase: “*The communion of saints*”? Do any of you picture a table with wine and bread around which sit haloed figures like St. Peter or St. Teresa? How about a huge throng of people from every tribe and tongue, streaming in from every direction to join a magnificent party, as a jazz band rips out the tune: “O when the saints, come marching in... How I long to be in that number, when the saints come marching in!” Or when you consider that phrase, do you picture a huddle of football players from New Orleans?

Well, there’s a bit of truth in all of those images and even some more and I want to think about it with you so that the next time you say: “*I believe in the communion of saints...*” you’re going to stand up straighter and smile more broadly because you are going to know what you are really saying... what you are personally striving to live into... and why this matters – maybe especially today.

So, let’s just start with what may be the most confusing word in this part of the Apostles’ Creed. I’m talking about that word, “saints.” If you grew up Catholic or Orthodox or Episcopalian, you know what that word means. It means “people not a lot like ME!” The word “Saint” is a title you put in front of the name of a very unusual person, somebody that lived a near perfect life, that maybe did miracles, or died a particularly gruesome death on behalf of their faith. Saints are people who get schools and hospitals named after them and have their images carved in stone. Saints are like the Christian equivalent of the Avengers or the Justice League. They may be communing someplace, but it’s not a circle I’m likely to be invited into. My cape is a little too soiled and my halo nowhere near shiny enough. Can any of you relate to this understanding of that word, “Saints”?

It didn’t use to be this way. When the Apostles’ Creed first came into being, the word “saint” or = *hagion* in the (Greek) and *sanctus* in (Latin) simply meant = “holy one.” That word “holy” might also have a certain remote, inaccessible, stained glass association for us, but what it really means is “consecrated” or “set apart.” Someone is regarded as “holy” when he or she is dedicated to a sacred purpose. In the first few centuries A.D., every follower of Jesus was regarded as a saint, because every Christ follower was somebody who had left behind paganism (or were trying to extricate themselves from it) and had consecrated themselves to the sacred purpose of drawing closer to God, and becoming more like Jesus, and helping Christ’s life-giving kingdom infiltrate and replace the destructive empires of this world.

Was every Christian in those days perfectly morally pure and ready to have their picture emblazoned in stained glass? It doesn’t look that way when you read the New Testament Epistles. People were in all sorts of different stages of transformation. It

was difficult to escape the pull of the idols of Roman culture. It was easy to slip back into the tribal mentality of the world around or the distorted notions of power, sex and money that characterized Roman paganism. It was as hard to follow Jesus and live for his kingdom in the first century as it is in the twenty-first century.

But the important thing to the first believers was that they were on the Way. In fact, that's what the early Christians were first called – "Followers of the WAY." They were = on the path of sanctification – which is simply an SAT word for the process of = being made more like Jesus and a more devoted citizen of his kingdom. Are YOU on that Way, yourself? Have you consecrated, as in committed, yourself to it? If so, then you may not have the "St." in front of your name – but you are what the early church called one of the saints.

That's not to say it will be easy for you or me or any of us to stay on the Way. Part of the challenge has to do with the way we get sucked into even conceiving of the CHURCH today. My friend, Colin Smith, suggests that there are FOUR particularly popular but problematic understandings of CHURCH that can undermine the saint-making process in you or me.

The first is when we start thinking of the church as a gas station. Do you ever slip into that? You think: *You know my spiritual gas tank is running a bit low right now, I think I'll go get filled up. I sure hope the preacher's bringing some high octane this Sunday. I need something that'll keep me motoring along till the next time I'm running low.* Or sometimes people start unconsciously approaching church as a sacred theater -- a place that offers entertainment and programs I like. *I think I'll go for an hour of escape, hopefully in a comfortable seat. I'll leave my problems at the door, enjoy the music and message and come out feeling better than when I went in. Thank goodness the theater's online now too!*

Then, there folks for whom church is something of a drug store. *It's where I can go to fill the prescription that will deal with my pain or my anxiety. I know Jesus never wants me to be too uncomfortable and he's designed church to be very therapeutic.* And then there's the fourth view, says Colin Smith. It's a view of church as sort of like a big box retailer – the good kind. *It offers the best products in a clean and safe environment for me and my family. The church offers great service at a low price—all in one stop—and with lots of parking.*¹

Can you find anything of yourself in those views? I can. Gosh, as a pastor, I often find myself trying to make church like that for you. I'm thinking all week long about how to ensure we've got great gas at all the pumps for when you decide to pull up or tune in. My teammates and I work hard to make sure that the music and media are first-rate. When we get letters that you've found something uncomfortable or irritating, we're hooked by it and talk about how to avoid offending next time. We think a lot around

here about our products, service and hospitality and how we can become the best possible place for kids and families to grow. And this is probably, mostly good.

It's just not the core of what Church is meant to be or what the Apostles' were thinking of when they said, "This I believe..." So, what was it? To the first believers, Church was the COMMUNION where saints get made -- where people became more like Jesus and more devoted citizens of his kingdom above all earthly empires. Church was not a place you went to once a week; it was a set of relationships you were immersed in and lived your life out of every day. The word "communion" is = *koinonia* in the original (Greek). It literally means = "fellowship." In ancient times, the term *koinonia* was used to describe any significant partnership – whether in marriage, business, social or political life, or international affairs – any context where people came together for mutual benefit and the greater good. But when we Christians use that word COMMUNION, we are describing FOUR specific relationships that profoundly change the way we do life.

The first and most important communion you and I have is with God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There's an image that comes to my mind as I think of that. It's from a time when Amy and I and our oldest son, took our youngest child into a swimming pool on a beautiful summer day. The three of us stood around him in a ring, and took turns holding his hands as he bounced up and down in the center of the circle, looking up into our faces with absolute delight and total trust, just so happy to be there.

I give you that image because, as Christians, we believe that at the moment we are baptized we are plunged into the center of a pool defined by the loving circle and strength of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From that moment forward, God is holding our hand every moment of every day. We never need to be afraid in this life or of what this life may do to us. God has us. And the more we look into God's face and attend to the communion we have with him, the more we receive guidance from his wisdom, and are shaped by his character, and find the power to keep bouncing even when we're down. This is what Jesus meant when he said: **If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit (John 15:5-8)**. It's why practices like worshipping, or reading the Bible, or praying, or walking in silence in God's creation are so important for you and me. It's how we remember and renew and abide in this most important of all relationships – the one from which all the fruit of the Spirit flow.

Alongside the communion we have with the "Holy One" in heaven, we also have communion with the Church on earth. And it can be hard in our day to remember how unique and important is the character of this Church. But there is a lesson from the past. First century Roman society was extremely individualistic, groupish, stratified, and divided. People took care of their own little circles. Those circles were echo chambers. People lived on-guard against the threats they perceived from others. Families were fragmented. Violence was rampant. Charity was rare.

Then into that culture strode the Jesus People. With a sense of identity and security rooted in their communion with God, the first Christians established a kind of community never before seen on earth. It was a circle where distinctions of class and race and nationality melted at the foot of the Cross. Slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, wealthy and poor became family to each other. As Acts 2 describes it, they met regularly together for meals, study, prayer and worship. They shared their resources to help any in their midst who had material need (Acts 2:42-47). They felt each other's joys and sorrows, as if they were one body, in the conviction that Jesus had made them so. When, for example, the poor Christians in Macedonia heard that St. Paul was taking up a collection for the relatively affluent believers in Jerusalem who were suffering under persecution, Paul says: **"They begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." (2 Cor 8:4).**

There is no community like the communion of saints when it is living into its calling. I got a phone call several days ago from a couple in our church who recently moved out of state. In going, they were mourning the loss of the very deep relationships they had with their small group in our church. But on the phone, the husband said to me: *"We found out that the Church of Jesus is here too. They've taken us in. They're helping us get settled and find all we need. We already feel like family."* I remember feeling the same thing when I moved to Northern Ireland in my early twenties, knowing no one, only to be embraced by the communion of saints. You can go today to Thailand and Kenya and Bangalore and experience a communion of the saints that will elevate the term "family."

Please take this in. The Church is God's plan to break down (as much as possible) the hardened hearts and divisive spirit of our age – before Jesus comes again to make all things new. I remember that each time I meet with my small group – my experiment in being part of the communion of saints. Honestly, I'm not sure I'd have chosen the members of this group, or they ME, apart from Christ. We are not a group that would be found alongside each other in nature. We don't see eye-to-eye on the events of our day. We did not all vote the same way in the last election. We vary widely in terms of temperament and paychecks. But because of the grace of God, the character of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, we have become family. We try to put everything else we value and are comfortable with one step below our consecration to become sanctified -- that is, more like Jesus.

I want THIS church to be like that everywhere. I want us to be a sign that God is doing something supernatural here – something not normally found in nature. It is why I pray that YOU will work hard in these next months to form some circle some place that expresses the communion of saints – people who may be flawed but on the Way to becoming like Jesus. It's why I am asking YOU to do everything within your power to never allow our different opinions about politics or the hot topics of our day to destroy the overarching unity we have as a people who belong above all else to the kingdom of

God. It's why I am asking more of you to come back in-person as soon as you are able, so we can look into your face again, because we miss you and YOU are our family.

But let me say this one last thing in closing. One day, we are going to see how great the communion of saints truly is. You see, we don't just have communion with God, or with the church on earth; we also have communion with the saints in heaven.

Some years ago, I shared the story of being on a rowing team at Yale that was one of the most concrete experiences of *koinonia* I've had in this world. As individuals, we were dramatically diverse. As a team committed to focusing on a higher call, we were utterly unified. But, then, through a comedy of errors, we lost what we thought was our most important race – a contest against Harvard for which we'd trained all year and then went down in defeat before ten thousand spectators. This was especially hard, as over the weeks that preceded the race, we'd been training out of a house that had been used by Yale rowing teams for over one hundred years. On the walls of the house, I could find the faded photographs of multiple generations of my ancestors.

As I sat in defeat, I could picture those faces, judging us for our failure. But now I think that all along they were cheering us on. You see, those who have striven boldly and stumbled greatly often understood that life can't be measured in a single moment. It is all about where you put your focus after you've failed. One biblical writer put it this way: **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Heb 12:1-2)**

What my rowing team did not yet get as we wallowed in despair that day against Harvard is that there was another moment ahead. Our earlier defeat was tempering us for an ultimate victory. A day was coming soon when we would cross the finish line as victors at a vastly larger event – the Henley Royal Regatta – before a cheering crowd of a hundred thousand supporters and the applause of the Crown.

Maybe YOU are in a place of despair or discouragement or defeat right now. All I can say is never forget that you are part of the Communion of Saints. You are secure in the center of the circle of God. You have a supernatural earthly family that will be there for you always. Even your failures can temper you for unseen victories. And waiting for you out there in the future, is a great cloud of witnesses – the persevering saints who have gone before you and who, even now, cheer for you from the stands of heaven. And one day you will cross the finish line and join the Great Family Reunion whose center will be God himself and whose joy will have no end.

¹ Colin Smith, "The Church: Sharing the Passion of Jesus," *PreachingToday.com*