



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

2nd Sunday after Epiphany: January 20, 2019

Sermon Title: “The Communion of Saints”

Gospel Text: John 2:1-11

“I believe...in the communion of saints...” We say those words almost every Sunday, as part of the Apostles’ Creed. It’s there, midway through the third article. But do you ever think about what that means? Because if we’re claiming, before God and our fellow Grace members, that we believe this stuff, wouldn’t it be good to know what it means? Today’s Gospel offers an opportunity to consider this phrase more deeply. So *what* is this “communion of saints,” and *why* is it important?

First, a word about the Apostles’ Creed. It’s a statement of beliefs about the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - all of which can be traced to particular passages within the New Testament. That’s why we call it the *Apostles’ Creed* – it represents a summary of the teachings of the Apostles as found in the New Testament. But there’s no way to prove that the Apostles actually wrote this creed. Our first historic evidence of it comes around the year 340, and it achieves its present form sometime around the 8th century. It probably had its origins in the baptismal liturgy of the ancient church, but within the Western expression of Christianity, the Apostles’ Creed is now commonly used on Sunday mornings, as well as during morning and evening daily prayer.¹ Luther thought very highly of the Apostles’ Creed, featuring it in his Small and Large Catechisms, and writing that this creed “sets forth all that we must expect and receive from God” and “teaches us to know [God] perfectly.”² That may be a bit of an overstatement on the part of Brother Martin, but the essential point is that the Apostles’ Creed is an ancient and important part of our faith and worship life, and an expression of belief we regularly use.

So with that background in mind, let’s return to our question. What is this “communion of saints” we claim to believe in, and why is it important? Well, think of a “communion” as a “community.” In this case, there are two broad communities with which we are concerned. The first one is the community of saints here on earth. There’s an old term for this community that you might have

heard before – the “Church Militant.” It doesn’t mean that we are all military soldiers but simply that we are here, in mortality, struggling together against sin.

Based on Luther’s Catechisms, I’d describe the communion of saints here on earth as a community into which the Holy Spirit has called and gathered us so that faith can be formed, hope can be fostered, and forgiveness can be given and experienced. Doesn’t that sound quite a bit like a church? It’s a *place*, an *activity*, and a *people*. The communion of saints then is a primary means by which God cares for us and blesses us.

And so we here at Grace Lutheran Church are part of the “communion of saints.” We are a place and a people that the Holy Spirit has called together so that our faith can be formed, our hope can be fostered, and we can be forgiven and forgive others. But we are not the entirety of the “communion of saints.” We can see other parts of the “communion of saints” all throughout State College and the world. For example, our friends down the street at St. Paul’s United Methodist and State College Presbyterian are also part of the communion of saints.

And so when we say we *believe* in the communion of saints, we’re acknowledging that the Holy Spirit has drawn us into communities of faith like this one so that *we* can be blessed and so that *we* can bless *others*. Additionally, we are acknowledging that we need these communities – even though we know they aren’t perfect – because they are the very best opportunity we have of experiencing Christ’s love and sharing it with others.

But how does it all work? Well, today’s Gospel lesson provides a helpful illustration. John tells a complex story that, at the cosmic level, offers a sign of Jesus’s divinity and a foretaste of his mission to love, redeem, and save all of creation. But at an earthier level, this story shows how God works through the communion of saints. First, consider the need that arises in this story. The bridegroom running out of wine was a serious problem. At the social level, it was a breach of hospitality that threatened to expose the bridegroom as an unworthy match for his spouse. At the practical level, because this celebration would go on for days and days, and because clean, drinkable water was often scarce, the absence of wine put the health and wellbeing of every person at that celebration at risk. The harmony and unity of that entire community was threatened.

And so in response to this need, Jesus brought relief by turning water into wine. He was the sole *author* of that blessing. But Jesus *administered* that blessing by working through the communion of saints. His mother Mary

interceded for his help. He called upon the *servants* to tend and fill those six stone water vessels. And he called upon the *chief steward* to affirm and proclaim the very good news that there was wine again – abundant amounts of wine – wine of the finest quality.

You see, when we say we believe in the communion of saints, we're saying we believe that Jesus continues to work through communities like this – even with our imperfections - to bring blessing to others. Are there needs in our community, and in our world? Of course there are. Any one of us could list a long litany of those problems. But as the communion of saints, can we make a difference? Can we pray like Mary did, and ask Jesus to intercede and bring relief to the world's troubles? As the communion of saints, might Jesus be calling us, like he called the servants, to roll up our sleeves and get involved by being the hands and feet of mercy, service, and compassion? And as Jesus uses us to bring relief and blessing, is he calling us, as the communion of saints, to be like the chief steward and proclaim to a weary and scared world that Jesus *loves* you, Jesus is *with* you, and Jesus is *blessing* you? Friends, when we as the Church are at our best, the communion of saints is *who* and *what* we are. *That's* something *I* can believe in, and I hope *you* can too.

There's one additional community that completes the “communion of saints” – it's something we often call the “Church Triumphant.” It's the great body of faithful people who have passed from this world into God's Kingdom. Many people think of that community as exclusively consisting of famous saints like the Apostles, St. Benedict, and St. Patrick – saints who appear in devotional paintings and icons, or those who are memorialized in statues and even birdbaths, like St. Francis. Certainly the noteworthy and famous saints *are* part of that community, and inspire us by their writings and their examples of faithful living. Their words, wisdom, and even music fill our prayers, enliven our liturgies, and enrich our worship.

But the communion of saints in the Church Triumphant is also made up of the less-known and less-celebrated people of God's kingdom who, through their quiet service and faithful examples, helped build this church, taught Sunday School classes, donated Cheerios for our children's activity bags, and just faithfully showed up, week-after-week. They too continue to bless and inspire us by their example, and are as deserving of our love as the famous saints. Though they are gone from us, we still need them, and thanks be to God, they remain a vital part of us.

The communion of saints - both those in the *heavens* and you in the *pews* - enables us to not only *attend* church but to *be* the church in its best and fullest expression. By God's grace the communion of saints has the capacity to transform the world. What a blessing! "I believe...in the communion of saints..." I hope you do too. Amen.

Citations

¹ *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, Vol. 1, p. 628; *Praying Together*, English Language Liturgical Consultation, p. 22.

² *Large Catechism*, introduction to the Second Part: The Creed.