

"The Communion of Saints"

"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to live thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers."

Pastor Ken Ensminger is one of my most important mentors and role models as a pastor. He was the long-time pastor of Jerusalem Lutheran Church in Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, where I worshipped during my four years in university. I remember him as a marvelous preacher and worship leader, a kind and compassionate person, and a pastor who would always have time to speak with me as I was discerning my call to ordained ministry; he even helped me get in contact with my home synod, since the bishop of the New Jersey Synod at the time was one of his seminary classmates. I often think of Pastor Ensminger and give thanks to God for the important role he has played in my life.

One of my many memories of Pastor Ensminger was a sermon in which he was speaking about the Apostles Creed. He insisted that there is one item in the Creed that he believed did not belong: the comma between the phrases "the holy catholic church" and "the communion of saints." For Pastor Ensminger, the church *is* the communion of saints, the gathering of God's holy people. This was not merely his own opinion, but is rooted in Martin Luther's *Sermons on the Catechism* in which Luther shares this definition of the church as a gathering of saints:

- "I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing but saints. Through the Christian church, that is, through its ministry, you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ."

We often think of "saints" as people of extraordinary holiness, people whose faithfulness and righteousness far exceeds those of ordinary people. We honor the great saints of history by putting their names on churches, hospitals, and schools. We remember the great saints on their feast days and immortalize their lives in narrative stories and on stained glass windows. Most of us would resist being labeled a "saint" because we believe that our lives are not worthy of such a great honor.

But in the Bible, "saint" does not refer only to a select few individuals but to the community of faith. The New Testament word "saint" (*hagioi*) means "holy ones" and is used to refer to both the earthly congregation ("To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus" – Ephesians 1:1) and the heavenly congregation, the angels ("And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'" – Luke 2:13-14). The Christian fellowship is holy as the temple of the Spirit centered on Christ as the holy servant. As a holy people, Christians are called to be holy ("But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." – 1 Peter 2:9). People are chosen and designated as "saints" not because of an inherent holiness that they possess but because they are chosen and made holy ("sanctified") by Christ ("To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." – 1 Corinthians 1:2). Holiness is by the calling of grace

in Christ, not by nature ("By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" – 1 Peter 1:3). According to the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, the Church is "the assembly of holy people [saints] who share in common the association of the same gospel or doctrine and the same Holy Spirit, who renews, sanctifies, and governs their hearts." (Article VII).

This understanding of the church as the communion of saints, the congregation of persons who have been called, gathered, and made holy through their baptism into Jesus Christ, is at the center of the teaching of the apostle in the letter to the Ephesians. The epistle is addressed "to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus" (1:1), although the letter may have been circulated and read in worship in several congregations near Ephesus. The letter is more general in nature than other Pauline epistles, teaching its readers what is at the heart of the Christian gospel and what it means to live as a member of "the holy catholic church the communion of saints."

- "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." – 1:15.
- "... so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints" – 1:18.
- "So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." – 2:18.

Being a member of the Church which is the communion of saints does not mean that those inside the church are superior to those on the outside, nor does it mean separation from the rest of humanity. As the people of Israel were chosen by God so that the whole world would be blessed through them ("... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." – Genesis 12:3), those who have been chosen by God to be saints also bear a significant responsibility:

- "One is chosen so that one might be an instrument of God's purposes in the world. But always keep in mind that it is God's purpose and not our own." – Mark Tranvik.

This responsibility that God has entrusted to the communion of saints is the reason why the apostle begins the second half of the letter with a plea to his readers to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and patience, with gentleness, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (4:1-3). The saints have been "given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" (4:7) and these gifts are to be used "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4:12). Because the saints have been "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever" (ELW Holy Baptism), they are called to live as the new creations that God has made them through their baptism into Christ, rejected former ways of thinking and acting and walking in newness of life:

- "You were taught to put away your former way of life, you old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." – 4:22-24.

The communion of saints has been called together to be "imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (5:1-2). Saints must be "careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil." (5:15-16). God's holy people know that they have been set aside for the

purpose of bearing the good news of Jesus Christ to others, and therefore they devote their lives to serving the one who rescued them from “*sin, death and the power of the devil*” so that we may “*belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “We have been transformed into the image of Christ, and are therefore destined to be like him. He is the only ‘pattern’ we must follow. And because he really lives his life in us, we too can ‘walk even as he walked’ (1 John 2:6) and ‘do as he has done’ (John 13:15), ‘love as he has loved’ (Ephesians 5:1), ‘forgive as he forgave’ (Colossians 3:13), ‘have this mind, which was also in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 2:5), and therefore we are able to follow the example he has left us, lay down our lives for the brethren as he did. It is only because he became like us that we can become like him. It is only because we are identified with him that we can become like him.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember the faithful departed, “*all the saints who from their labors rest.*” We remember those saints in this congregation who died in the past year, names that we read in worship this morning that remind us of their lives and their witness to the love of God. We remember saints with whom we shared life and love, saints who are gone from our sight but remain in our minds and in our hearts. We remember saints who laid the foundations of this congregation, whose names and faces are unknown to us but upon whose labors our mission and ministry continues. We remember saints of all times and all places who were called by God in Holy Baptism, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever, and were made holy by God’s eternal presence so that they might continue the call of God’s own people to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” We remember *all* the saints – those we have known as well as those who are unknown to us – whose light shone brightly so that others could glorify God because of their dedication to living as God’s holy people.

- “What is a saint? A saint is a person who got killed for Christ in the first three centuries. What is a saint? Those people who were religious heroes of the church, had chapels and churches built in honor of them and they are now up in heaven interceding with God for us. What is a saint? Our grandmothers and grandfathers, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, friends, who have died and go before us into heaven. What is a saint? Someone who has died this past year in the life of the church. What is a saint? You. Yes, you. You are the living saints of God. You are God’s holy people. God takes enormous pleasure in your company. Your lives are an inspiration to one another.” – Edward Markwart.

Pastor Ensminger was right; they shouldn’t be a comma in the Creed between “the holy catholic church” and “the communion of saints.” The church *is* the communion of saints, the fellowship of God’s holy people who have been called by God, made holy through water and the Word, and blessed so that they might be a blessing to others. We are the saints whom God has equipped to do the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, to be the salt of the earth and light of the world. We are the church – and we are the saints! Amen.