

**Credo III – “I believe . . . in the communion of saints”**

March 19, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year A

(Part 3 of a Sermon Series)

Text: *“One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”*

-- Psalm 145:4, NRSV

*“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.”*

-- Hebrews 12:1-2, NRSV

Last week in Part II of our series on the Apostles’ Creed, we said that the words “holy catholic church” were not the least bit offensive as a part of our fundamental affirmation of faith. Any misunderstanding or reticence to step boldly into this inclusive and universal acclamation was due to ignorance and the tensions between and among various traditions of bygone eras in the church’s history.

To affirm that we believe “in the holy catholic church” is to express-in-faith that God chooses to be close to us – thereby making us “holy” to him – but never in isolation from one another! God’s work of salvation is always an inclusive reach; a holiness that is guaranteed by Jesus’ faithfulness – the vertical dimension of the cross’s reach. And it is Jesus who commanded us to love one another, the horizontal span of his grace as we express it to one another; sacred dimensions of height and length and width and depth that is a holy catholicity – which is – as the old hymn suggests – *“one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”*

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.



(Photo above: Sapper Dunbar (at center) stands with his family as they welcome him home from World War I, Adelaide, South Australia, August 1919; <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P05328.001>)

A Christian minister once remarked that the phrase "*holy catholic church*" teaches us that the church spans the globe . . . But the next phrase "*communion of saints*" teaches us that the church transcends time.<sup>i</sup>

Indeed, the marvelous words of Psalm 145 – a high and holy hymn to God expressing that one generation shall laud his works to another – coupled with the great litany of faithful saints from Biblical history in the passage from Hebrews, speaks to the significance of God's faithfulness through the ages.

The communion of saints is that body of believers who have expressed their confidence in the loving-kindness of God – whether those believers were the members of Abraham's family leaving Haran behind to journey in to the future; or Moses and Miriam dancing at the very rim of the Red Sea in celebration and praise at the defeat of Pharaoh's chariots, or Rahab the prostitute who kept Israel's spies from harm, or Mary lifting up her voice in tender praise that she would be God's special servant –

all who have expressed their faith in God – who have looked deeply into his plan for salvation are the church – his communion of saints.

This phrase, *communion of saints*, expresses the belief that all these are bound together in fellowship to one another and to us; there is a blessed tie that binds us.

*We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses . . .* Who have themselves run the race set before them and who encourage us to run with perseverance that same race – to go further in the grace that the great pioneer and perfecter of their faith had laid out for them to go – so that they, too, could mark the way and say, *"Look, here is the way! Go here!"*

James Batchelor, a pastor offers a bit of caution, however: We more often feel encouraged by those who have gone before us, than we are willing to admit the same from among those saints around us in our everyday lives. He offers this perspective in the form of verse:

*"Living above with saints we love, that will be grace and glory;  
But living below with saints we know, that is a different story."* <sup>ii</sup>

And yet, when we affirm our belief in the communion of saints, we commit ourselves to an active fellowship of both those who have gone before and those who are at our right and left.

The communion of the saints is a fellowship of all who have been called by God to live their lives in him – to be *close to him* as we said, last week . . . The word communion here is both a reference to the great supper we share at the Lord's table – his body and blood that is our spiritual food – but this communion is also a participation, a joining together, whereby we are tied to one another – not as a rope to bind us down, but as a cord to link us together . . .

On July 24, 2002, eighteen miners became trapped some 270 feet below ground in the Quecreek mine near Somerset, Pennsylvania. Nine of the miners found their way to safety; the other nine were trapped in an air-pocket in a flooded portion of the mine in total darkness for 77 hours. These nine were rescued by a safety cage-unit that was lowered through a drilled hole into the space

they inhabited; that pulled them one-by-one to the surface on July 28, three days later. In the time of their 77 hour imprisonment, the miners lashed themselves together saying they would live or die together in the deep dark of the flooded caverns at Quecreek. . . Such are the ties that might bind us – the glorious company of the communion of saints . . . that we are willing to share one another's joys and sorrows. When one suffers, all suffer; when one rejoices, all rejoice. The communion of saints links the past, the present and the future of the church in its march forward into God's plan for the kingdom he has established.

Equally, the church is visible and invisible; it is militant – at work in the here and now to declare the mighty acts of God to a world desperate for good news, and the church is triumphant at home in heaven – the saints whose lives of faith give us courage and hope for the facing of the hours of trial that we must endure. This is alluded to by the Psalmist:

*One generation shall laud [God's] works to another.*

How many of you have done some kind of genealogical work on your family? Tracing your mother or father back through their families; researching an uncle or a great aunt and have discovered some curiosity that leads you further on? So many of these ancestors have stories that illuminate our own lives that in their lives recounted, we are blessed and encouraged . . . We see God at work in them that helps us see him at work in us.

Think of someone dear to you who has passed on into God's eternal heart of love . . . Hold them like a framed picture . . . We miss those who have gone on from here; no longer with us on earth, and yet, they and we belong to God eternally through our fellowship with him. In our communion with God they are communing with us – a great cloud of witnesses that cheers us on within the glorious mystery of God's grace at work across the world and through all time. The really do – *I believe* it.

(The following comes to us from the late great preacher, Dr. Fred Craddock.)

*"Do you have a piece of paper? Do you have a piece . . . Well, use your worship bulletin. Would you write in the margin somewhere or at the bottom these words: I thank my God for all my remembrance of you. I thank my God for all my remembrance of you. And write a name. You choose the name. You remember the name. Write another name, and another name, and another name.*

*"Have you written any names? Do you have a name or two? Keep the list. Keep the list, because to you, it's not a list. In fact, the next time you move, keep that. Even if you have to leave your car, and your library, and your furniture, and your [computer], and everything else, keep that with you.*

*"In fact, when your [life] has ended and you leave the earth, take it with you. I know, I know, I know. When you get to the gate, St. Peter's going to say, 'Now look, you went into the world with nothing, you've got to come out of it with nothing. Now what've you got?'*

*"And you'll say, 'Well, it's just some names.'*

*'Well, let me see it.'*

*'Well, now, it's just some names of folks I worked with and folks who helped me.'*

*'Well, let me see it.'*

*'This is just a group of people that, if it weren't for them, I'd have never made it.'*

*"We'll say, 'I want to see it.' And you'll give it to him, and he'll smile and say, 'I know all of them. In fact, on my way here to the gate I passed [them in] a group. They were painting a great big sign to hang over the street. And it said, 'Welcome Home.'"<sup>iiii</sup>*

Do you believe this? . . . I think this is precisely what the communion of saints really means . . . It is why I chose the photo I did on the cover of the bulletin (and on this sermon). That photo is an iconic image of love that awaits all who make their way home. The photo concerns a soldier, Sapper Dunbar, being welcomed home from World War I by his extended family in Adelaide, South Australia in August of 1919. He is front and center with the many people who have loved and cared for him in awaiting his return (including the family dog!). No doubt members of that family painted the sign over his head.

In the heavenly home coming that awaits all of us, do you know who I think climbs on high to hang the sign up, once it is finished?

*Yes, Jesus . . .* For it is in him and with him and through him that the saints – you and me and any name you have written down on that paper – find their eternal communion together.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Brian Ondracek as quoted by Ray Pritchard in a sermon entitled, “All One Body We: ‘The Communion of Saints’”. See the sermon at <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/all-one-body-communion-of-saints/>.

<sup>ii</sup> James T. Batchelor, from a sermon “All saints Day”, <http://lcmssermons.com/index.php?sn=729>

<sup>iii</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, Chalice Press, St. Louis, MO; pp. 152-153.