

The Communion of Saints

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I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

It's not like I spend a lot of time thinking about the contents of the Apostles' Creed — after all, being a Mennonite, I was taught to shrug off the traditional creeds in favor of the ordinances of the Mennonite church and, in the revivalist tradition, the personal testimony. Indeed, I was taught that there was something suspicious about creeds — a suspicion that lingers in our copies of them where the editors painstakingly point out that the use of the word “catholic” emphatically does **not** refer to the Roman Catholic church. Apparently, nothing could be worse than to be caught affirming something that sounds Roman Catholic.

Anyway, while I was a student in France, so many years ago, I attended a Lutheran church where the Apostles' Creed was recited every Sunday. For many years

afterward, I could still recite it in French but not in English. “Je crois en Dieu, le pere tout-puissant....”

Then, last winter, something happened that brought clarity to a phrase in the Apostles’ Creed that I had previously not thought much about at all. The phrase occurs toward the end of the creed, when we say we believe in the “communion of saints.”

So what is this “communion of saints?” We celebrated communion last week. Was that what is meant by “communion of saints?” We have a pot-luck once a month. Is that the “communion of saints?” I don’t think so. The phrase immediately preceding “communion of saints” is the aforementioned and carefully-delineated “holy catholic church” where “catholic” doesn’t mean Roman Catholic. But the phrase does refer directly to the “church” and it does refer to our spiritual unity as a church. I would also think the phrase includes everything we do as a church, including our formal and informal ecclesial actions.

No, the “communion of saints” must be referring to something else. Now, in good time-honored tradition of American Protestant individualism, we could just invent a meaning for it, form a new church and be done with it. But I’m old school. Not only that, I work in a library and make part of my living by looking things up. The Apostles’ Creed is even older than I am. It has a much longer and more discussed history than I do, and a considerable history of commentary has accrued around it. Here is what the old Catholic Encyclopedia from 1917 says about it:

The communion of saints is the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of

the same mystical body under Christ its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices.

Now that's a Roman Catholic mouthful, and I'm no Roman Catholic. We non-Roman Catholics shy away from such things as "purgatory" or notions of venerating the saints and "exchanging supernatural offices" with them. Just more Roman Catholic doctrinal flummery, as far as we're concerned.

Of course, we non-Roman Catholics also have the unfortunate habit of throwing the baby of spiritual wisdom out with the bathwater of ecclesial empire when it comes to Roman Catholicism. The core idea I think we need to hold onto regarding the communion of saints is this: we are and we do celebrate a unity with those who have gone on before. We heard a recitation of some of those names earlier when Su read to us from the Letter to the Hebrews and referred to the "great cloud of witnesses." We know that we are alive and they are no longer, but they are somehow *with* us and we with them and through some mystery, this is all connected with what the church is.

The reality of this came to me in a new way last winter, when our brother Don White and sister Betty Wenger, got married here in this church. As most of you know, both Don and Betty lost their previous spouses to cancer. Notwithstanding the pain that they both went through in losing their spouses, they were willing to open themselves to the possibility of new beginnings and by George it looks like they've got one.

But the beauty of the ceremony here and the joy of the reception afterwards led me inescapably to the notion that both Sally and Nelson, Don and Betty's respective spouses who had passed on, were nevertheless somehow present with us through the

whole thing: the songs, the vows, the meal and the celebration afterward. They were not only mystically present, but they could be said to have been physically present, in that half of their DNA walks among us the form of their children: Don and Sally's daughters Jane and Miriam, and Nelson and Betty's sons and daughter, Ryan, Deborah and Jason. And the grandchildren, and the generations yet to come.

Perhaps this is something of what is meant by "the communion of saints." My own father passed away over 30 years ago, but I can hear his voice in my ear and feel his caring in my heart. And it goes beyond family: those spiritual mentors I have had remain with me in much the same way. I carry them with me wherever I go and sometimes find myself thinking "What would so-and-so have said about this?" All of us here this morning are among the faithful on earth and in becoming part of the tradition have also become part of the communion of saints, just as the old tradition says. I think we should claim that standing and I thank Don and Betty and Sally and Nelson for helping me claim it just a little bit more.

Finally, there is the matter of the holiday tomorrow: Memorial Day. Although we Mennonites are always happy to have another day off, we have historically not wanted to have much truck with Memorial Day. After all, it is the day of commemoration for those who have died in military service to this country. Since we have historically opposed military service, it seems out of place for us then to honor those who have died doing something we oppose.

But, I think our fastidiousness in this matter may be less virtuous than we hope. I think of what is called the High Priestly Prayer in the gospel of John, Chapter 17. In

verses 20-23 particularly, Christ prays that those who believe in him might be one, as he and the Father are one.

Now the unity of the church is not an area in which we Mennonites have led the way, and our separation from those of our brothers and sisters who have given their lives in military service may be as much a measure of our failure at living out Christ's vision from John 17 as anything.

In addition to learning things from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, we Anabaptists also have things to learn from our Quaker brothers and sisters. If indeed there is that which is of God in each of us, then it may well be that our own seeing through the glass darkly prevents us from seeing that which is of God in those who serve and in those who have died in military service. The road of military service may not be the road we have been called to, but we cannot therefore say that the Light dare not shine within those who are on that road. It is not up to us to decide where and how the Light shines for others. It is up to us to follow Jesus.

So we must acknowledge the limited scope of our vision here. If God's shalom and God's justice are one, then who are we to support one and oppose the other? What are we doing if we make the best the enemy of the good? If God's shalom and God's justice are indeed one, then we can only confess our own blindness in failing to understand how they are one, and pray that God will grant rest to those who have died in the service of this our country. So do I confess and so do I pray.

Will you stand with me and we will recite the Apostles' Creed together. It is found at #712 in your hymnals.

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen