

The Communion of Saints
Luke 24:13–35
Sunday, October 2, 2022 (World Communion)

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. May we simply *hear* the word that you have spoken, that we might *know you*, and in knowing *you*, we might truly come to know *ourselves* and *each other*, in Christ. Amen.

Last week we had a baptism, so we *talked* about baptism (what it meant for Jesus and the early Christians, and what it means for *us*). This week we're having communion, so I thought, "We should talk about communion!" There's a lot that we could talk about here. If baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life (like being born), then communion is what nourishes us so that we can grow. Just like a baby is born and needs food to live and grow, *we* need the bread of heaven that nourishes our souls, feeds our faith, and helps us grow in Christ. Just like baptism is a reminder of Christ's death and resurrection, in which we are buried with him and raised to new life, communion is a reminder of Christ's saving death (his body broken and his blood shed for us).

But I want to think about one particular aspect of communion today. It's something we don't normally talk about, even though we *say it* almost every week. The communion of saints. We just said it a few minutes ago in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." We *say* it, but do we know what it *means*?

A lot of times when we hear the word *saint*, we think of super holy people like St. Francis, St. Augustine, Mother Teresa (or St. Teresa of Calcutta), St. Catherine of Sienna (my personal favorite); people who somehow model the life of Christ to us and show us what it looks like to

live a life of faith. And that *is* one understanding of the word *saint*. But it's not what we're talking about when we say, "the communion of saints."

When Paul talked about *saints* in his letters (which he did *a lot*), he used the Greek word *hagios*, which means, "holy ones," and it is used to refer to *all* Christians. Not just super holy special ones, but *everyone* who is striving to follow the way of Jesus Christ. He starts off his letter to the Romans by saying, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." His letter to the Ephesians, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." To the Philippians, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons." To the Colossians, "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae." He refers to them *all* as *saints*, "holy ones."

The word *holy* means, "set apart for a special purpose," and what Paul says is that as Christians, we have been set apart from the rest of the world to be used for God's purposes. It doesn't mean that we're *better*, just that we're *different*. We are called to be different, to live in ways that are different from the rest of the world, to live lives that are set apart for God, to live *holy* lives. *We* are *all* saints.

So when we talk about the *communion* of saints, we're not just talking about communion as a sacrament; this meal. The word *communion* comes from a Latin word that means, "communal, common, or shared." It has to do with *community, fellowship, relationship*. I saw one definition that says, "a joining together of minds or spirits." We refer to the Lord's Supper as communion because we believe that, in it, our minds and our spirits are joined together with Christ and with each other. We are in fellowship, together, at Christ's table. So to say that we believe in the communion of saints means that we believe that all of God's people, all of *us* are somehow

connected, in community, in fellowship, joined together in mind and spirit. And when I say *all* of God's people, I mean *all* of God's people, past, present, and future, in heaven and on earth.

I like to think about it this way. This is my grandmother's Bible. She used to read it every night – probably more than that – and I have memories of when I would spend the night at their house, I would walk into their bedroom to say goodnight, and she would be there reading this Bible. She died 14 years ago, but when I open this Bible, I can smell her house. It's like I am transported right back there. And as *I* read this Bible, I come across her notes, things that she underlined, things that she tucked away in the pages to save, and it's like she is there with me.

Her husband, my grandfather, taught me how to fish. I have countless memories of fishing with him, standing on the bank of a pond in Kentucky. I have his fishing lures and other fishing tools that he used. And whenever I go fishing, whenever I cast out, I am right there with him on the bank of that pond in Kentucky.

My other grandfather took up woodworking toward the end of his life. He made me this dog howling at the moon. I have a walking stick that he made from the branch of a dogwood tree and engraved a cross on it. Whenever I hold these things that his hands held and worked with, he is there with me.

And his wife, my other grandmother, was an artist. She painted hundreds and hundreds of paintings in her life. We have some hanging in our home. And whenever I look at them, I am taken back to the times sitting out on her back patio, when she taught *me* how to paint. And I am *with her* again.

These people who are not with me are somehow *with me*.

Jesus had died. They all saw it. It wasn't like, "Oh, maybe he's okay." He was *dead*, and they *despaired*. But then two of his disciples were walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, and they were joined by a stranger. The stranger walked with them and talked with them, opened up the scriptures to them, helped them understand exactly what had happened with Jesus. When they reached their destination, the stranger kept walking, but since it was almost nighttime, they urged him to stop and stay the night with them. So he did. And as they were sitting at a table eating dinner, this stranger took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, just as Jesus had done three days before. And when he did that, their eyes were opened, and they realized that they were actually sitting at the table *with Jesus*.

He had *died*, but he was *with them*, in fellowship with them. And they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road about scripture?" Have you ever had your heart burning within you because you felt like something was happening that you couldn't quite understand it, but you knew it was *big*, and it was *good*?

They were in communion with Christ, even after his death. But they were *also* in communion with that stranger, before they even *knew* it was Christ.

When we come to this table and share this meal that Christ shared with his disciples, Jesus Christ is here with us, in fellowship with us, in communion with us, our minds and spirits joined together with his. Even though he is not physically here with us, as we eat the bread that is his body and drink the cup that is his blood, he is somehow *with us*. If you open yourself up to that mystery, that possibility, that can change your life, your faith, *everything*. God is not some far

off, unknowable deity. You can be in communion with God, with Jesus Christ. You can *know* God and *be known by* God. You can experience God's presence with you and love for you. You can live your life *with* God.

But we are *also*, at this table, in communion with *each other*. As we all share in the body of Christ, we *become* the Body of Christ. As we all share the same meal at the same time, *our* minds and spirits are joined together. We are reminded that Christ did not just die for *me* or for *you* but for *us*. And for a moment, all of the things that divide us and get in the way in this life are gone as we have this glimpse, this foretaste of what life will be like in the Kingdom of God.

But we are *also* in communion with those saints who are not here. Those who have gone on before us – my grandparents, the people you love, Ernie McMillan, Lois Glaser, Bob Risk, Melody Ticknor, Suzanne Frederick, Oliver Feldman, all our brothers and sisters in Christ here who have gone on to join the Church Triumphant in the eternal presence of God – as we share this meal that *they* shared, that *we* shared *with* them, we are in communion with them, even now. Like we sing in the hymn, *For All the Saints*, “O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia!”

Those saints who are still living but have moved on – Victor and Jane Wilson, Ellen Moeller, Monica Henkel, Debbie Railton, Jose Irizarry, David and Christine Markle, Steve and Kelly Barnes, and so many others, as we share this meal that maybe somewhere *they* are sharing today, our minds and our spirits are joined together with theirs, in fellowship with them at the Lord's Table, wherever that table might be.

But also, what we are specifically reminded of today on World Communion Sunday, is that, like the disciples were at the table in fellowship with a stranger before they *knew* it was Jesus, *we* are in communion with strangers we do not know but who are actually our brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians in Brazil and Argentina, Israel and Egypt, Russia and Rwanda, Christians meeting in secret in China and Iran, people we will never meet or know in this life. As *they* share this meal today and *we* share this meal today, *we all* share this meal today, and we are in communion with *all* of God's people.

For the past two and a half years, the Elliott family in Nebraska – Sean and Megan and their children Khaleb, Kyler, Hannah, Hailey, and Sam – have been worshipping with us every week by livestream. You don't know them. You might never get to meet them (although I hope you *do* get to soon). But they are a part of the life of this church. And as *we* share this meal today and *they* share this meal today, you are *joined* to them, in communion with them, your brothers and sisters in Christ whom you do not know.

As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth (who we are *also* joined to and in communion with), “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

To say that we believe in the communion of saints is to say that we believe in the power of God's love to reach across the boundaries of time and space, life and death. We are all *connected* in Christ. When we are at the Lord's table sharing this meal, when we are singing hymns of praise, saying the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, reading scripture, caring for the sick and the poor,

it is never just *us*. It is never just *you*. It is *all* our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout time and place, sharing this meal with us, living out our faith in Jesus Christ *together*.

So let us prepare to commune with the saints, with God and all God's people – those who are *here* and those who are *not*, those whom we *know* and those whom we do not know *yet*. Life is *so much more* than you can *see*. May that mystery be opened to us, and may our hearts burn within us, as Christ and all his children are made known to us in the breaking of the bread.