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**Pentecost 13 –September 2, 2022**

**“The Communion of Saints”**

**Read: Hebrews 12: 1 - 13 / Memorize: Hebrews 12: 1**

So when we speak the Apostolic Creed, there is this short line: “the communion of saints.” It’s pretty quickly said. I wonder if you think about it as you say it. Who are the saints and what is this communion of saints? Just in case you’re perplexed this is not All Saints’ Day, Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>. This is Pentecost 13.

According to the New Testament, the saints are not a select group of persons with halos around their heads. Saints are simply people who live by faith in Jesus and, in whose lives, the Holy Spirit is at work.

Paul frequently refers to saints as he begins his letters to different churches. Some biblical translations translate the Greek word as God’s people, rather than saints. They are the same.

Where did this tradition of remembering saints come from? The Roman church taught that to be canonized, proclaimed a saint, one had to have died and needed to be credited with some miraculous event. It often takes decades to be proclaimed a saint. They accord deep reverence to those to whom this designation is given and designated days to remember them. They also set aside one day for remembering all saints.

The Reformation church continued to honor saints, but saw them in a different light. There were both live saints and saints, who had died. It didn’t matter whichever, because they were all members of the Body of Christ, rather than setting some apart because of some special action.

Because of that difference in opinion, they drastically reduced the number of saint’s days. At the same time, they continued the tradition of observing All Saints’ Day, providing that the commemoration of saints was in keeping with the Gospel.

In a way, as we commemorate All Saints', it also calls us to recognize the unity of the church. We may have different ways of identifying saints, but they are all Christ's people, no matter what their race, nation or denomination may be.

While we think of the saints who are still alive, called the church militant, we also want to remember those who have completed their labors on earth. Those who have died have transferred their membership from the church militant, to the church triumphant, which is in heaven.

It gives us a vision of heaven, lifting the veil that separates those living from those who have died. We hear that echo in our hymn "For All the Saints" in the line, "We feebly struggle, they in glory shine."

It is a reminder that we cannot sever the bond of Christian fellowship, those who have departed are still in Christ, as are we. In Hebrews 11 we heard the roll call of saints. Now, in this chapter, the writer of Hebrews describes them as a "cloud of witnesses surrounding us." They are the cheering section, urging us who are still on the playing field, to put forth every effort, to win with them, the victor's crown of gold.

While the saints in heaven have entered the rest, the saints on earth are still involved in the battle with Satan. The writer of Hebrews speaks of encumbrances that must be thrown off; of that tenacious hold of sin that must be broken.

This is what led Luther to say that in this life the saints of God are never complete but always in the making. "This life," he said, "is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

Rather than claiming sinless-ness, the more of a saint a person is, the more they see their own imperfections. You remember that Paul called himself, "the chief of sinners." Until the day of his martyrdom he could say at last, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

A professor of the New Testament, said to a class, "From my own experience I must say that I am not making any progress in sanctification. I only see myself more and more clearly as a sinner." One of his students was astounded at this comment and

got up at once and said, “This is terrible. Here’s our teacher who, by word and example, is supposed to teach us the Christian life, and he only sees himself as a sinner.”

Whereupon another professor answered the young man, “Young man, don’t you recognize a saint when you see one? The closer to God a man is, the more keenly aware he is of his own sin.” Luther reminds us that we are “saint and sinner” at the same time.

The emphasis of saint and sinner is not on our achievement but on our willingness to accept what God offers. It is our weakness, our failure, our helplessness that entitles us to His grace. As Tertullian says, “Saints are beggars who live by the wealth of God.”

Such are the saints but they are only found in the communion of saints. There is no such thing as a solitary saint. The Holy Spirit, who creates faith in our hearts, also binds the hearts of believers together into a fellowship in Christ. That is why we can talk about the “Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” They are one in the same. Christ is the living center of faith and of the church and its members.

The New Testament bears out this definition. It is full of impressive word pictures that portray the close relationship between Jesus and His people. He is the foundation, they are the temple. In Him the structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple. He is the vine we are the branches. Jesus says that a branch can only bear fruit if it is connected to the vine. Without a living relationship to Jesus, we are sawed off and have no possibility of bearing fruit.

Perhaps, our strongest image is that of Jesus as the head and we as the members of His body. The church is not a mere organization but rather, a living organism. We are not merely disciples and followers of Christ, but parts of His living body, ingredients of the life of Christ on earth.

Which leads us to an understanding that is vital. There are no saints, apart from the communion of saints. True Christianity can never be a private matter, you in your small corner and me in mine. The vine and the branches form one living whole. Even apart, we are joined together. The Body of Christ, the church, is held together by every joint; one member cannot say to another, I do not need you.

God's saints, whether on earth or in heaven, do not ask: What is there in it for me? In Luther's words "Faith seeks nothing for itself in this world or in the next." Trusting faith is God-centered and neighbor-centered, never self-centered.

Think about this, so close is the togetherness and the for-another-ness of the communion of saints that not even the saints who have entered the rest of God can enjoy the full joy of heaven before we are reunited with them.

The writer of Hebrews bears this out in the verse just preceding chapter 12. He writes: "Yet they did not enter upon the promised inheritance, because, with us in mind, God has made a better plan, that only in company with us shall they reach their perfection." It is only when God's redemptive purpose is fulfilled in Christ's coming, that we shall have the perfect "All Saints" day.

Here's your question: How will you live out your calling as a saint in your community?