

Communion of the Saints

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Romans 1:1-7

Revelation 19:1-9

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton

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First United Presbyterian Church

Bellefontaine, Ohio

Now, whether you knew it or not, this is going to be a busy week in the Christian church. Today is REFORMATION SUNDAY, when we remember the work of Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox and other reformers who, in the 16th century, set about to REFORM the Catholic church and bring it back to what it was supposed to be – a place where the gospel of Jesus Christ is boldly proclaimed and salvation comes by means of our faith in God’s grace...and God’s grace alone!

Tomorrow, of course, is ALL HALLOWS’ EVE...or *Halloween* as we like to call it...which, instead of being a day for *Trick or Treat* ...or ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night (and which, by the way, THIS community celebrates on the last Thursday night of October despite the fact that it rarely falls on October 31)...was originally a RELIGIOUS festival in preparation for ALL SAINT’S DAY which the church celebrated on November 1st, remembering the SAINTS of the church whose stories we know something about...people like Saint Peter...and Saint Paul...and Saint Mary...and Saint Nicholas...and soon to be sainted Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II.

Of course now, those are all CATHOLIC saints...ROMAN CATHOLIC saints...and we PROTESTANTS don’t do much celebrating of the saints anymore...which is precisely why the day AFTER All Saints’ Day...November 2nd...is FAR more important in the life of the Protestant Church...even though we rarely remember it anymore either! Because while All Saints’ Day celebrates the KNOWN saints of the church...the day AFTER All Saints Day, which is known as ALL SOULS’ DAY, celebrates ALL those who have died in the faith...the faithful departed...whether they made a mark in the world or not...the SAINTS who are known to God and God alone – people like our loved ones...and our friends...and our neighbors...and our fellow church members – people who are no longer with us in THIS life...but are living in the great COMMUNION OF SAINTS that the Evangelist John talked about in his God-inspired vision in Revelation. Which, in reality, means that every single ONE of us will one day be SAINTS in the eyes of the Lord when WE TOO take our place at the great banquet feast in the Kingdom of Heaven.

But, you know, something about that idea really bothers me. Oh, not that I’ll one day take my place at the banquet feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s a WONDERFUL affirmation...and I rejoice in that knowledge! It’s a GREAT comfort and joy to know that because of God’s grace, I TOO will one day be one of God’s “saints”...that when I’m dead and gone, I TOO will be joining in the great *Communion of the Saints* in the glories of God’s Heavenly kingdom. But still, it bothers me. It really BOTHERS me! Because it doesn’t happen until AFTER I’m dead and gone. And what I’m concerned about...because I think it was precisely what Jesus was concerned about...is what happens in THIS life...in the here and now!

You see, according to the Roman Catholic Church, there are three things that are required to become a saint:

1. You’ve got to be dead!
2. There has to be proof positive that you live a good and pious life.
3. That good and positive life that you lived has to be confirmed by evidence of at least three miracles after death...which, I think, is probably a little out of reach for most of us! I don’t think I’ll be able to DO my three miracles after I’m dead and gone! Which’ll disqualify me from sainthood! And THAT’S what bothers me!

Why does it have to be AFTER I'm dead and gone? Why can't I become a saint NOW by the way I live my life in THIS life RATHER than in some life to come? Why can't YOU live YOUR life in such a way as to be one of God's "Saints" in the here and now...instead of in the by and by? Why can't we ALL be considered saints by loving God and loving neighbors RIGHT NOW...by embodying God's gracious, loving kindness RIGHT NOW...by being attune to and LIVING the Divine Presence of God, as Jesus did, in our lives RIGHT NOW? Why CAN'T we all be saints ... RIGHT NOW?

One of the scripture passages that is traditionally read on ALL SAINTS' DAY is known as the BEATITUDES from the 5th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel. We didn't read those Beatitudes earlier this morning, but hopefully you remember them.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Mt. 5:1-10)

I mean REALLY! Who could compose a list of more "saintly" virtues...OR a list of more IMPOSSIBLE ones? Like the TEN COMMANDMENTS, the Beatitudes confront us with an ideal vision – GOD'S vision – of who we can be...of who, in fact, we ARE! But most of us read them like paragraphs in a job description and then decide that it is futile to even apply. We couldn't POSSIBLY do that...so why even TRY?

What makes us admit defeat before we even try, however, is believing that sainthood is some "carrot on a stick"...something that is dangled before us such that if we CAN do the Beatitudes...or CAN live the Ten Commandments...then maybe we can finally become SAINTS. But since we know we CAN'T...at least not perfectly...we just give up and decide SAINTHOOD is simply out of our reach. An IMPOSSIBILITY!

The reality, however, is quite different. And that's exactly what the Apostle Paul was trying to tell us in the opening verses of both his letter to the Corinthians AND the Romans.

Listen again, first from Corinthians:

To the church of Jesus Christ which is in Bellefontaine (it really says to the church in Corinth, of course, but I made it Bellefontaine so it would be relevant to our listening ears!) to all who are called God's saints, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus, together with all people everywhere who worship the Lord Jesus Christ! May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace, both now and forevermore!

And then from Romans:

I Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, write to you who are in Bellefontaine, (again, it really says Rome...but you get the idea!) you whom God has called his saints because you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. (And then, as if to emphasize the point, he says it again) I write to you, whom God loves and calls his saints.

The reality is that simply by BEING God's people...simply BEING in union with Christ...simply BEING loved by God...we are ALREADY GOD'S SAINTS...because all it takes to be a SAINT is to belong to God. It's not a matter of BEING good or DOING good or living this set of rules or that set of commands. And it's ESPECIALLY not about working three miracles that can be documented by the Vatican. It's simply a matter of being a part of God's people...and a part of his Son, Jesus, the Christ. Once you have linked up with the body of Christ...once you have become a part of the Family of God's people...once you have sat together at Christ's table and partaken of the bread and cup which are symbols of God's undying love and grace in your life...you have everything you need to BE a saint. You ARE a saint! NOT a perfect person! NOT somebody who's got it all

together! NOT someone who has done three miracles and been beatified by the Church! But someone who is loved by God and is ALREADY considered a saint! You then HAVE your identity!

AHHH! But here's the thing: You have your CHOICE – the to live as who you ARE...or to NOT live as who you are! It's up to YOU then...and ME as well...to decide whether we're going to BE who and what God has ALREADY declared us to be...SAINTS!

Now, this is complicated, I know...although perhaps it only sounds complicated because such simple truths often confound our ears. The truth is that we are ALREADY saints...precisely because God loves us and calls us God's own. But it is also true that God gives us the freedom to forsake our identity...to fail to live up to it...to choose NOT to exercise the capacity for sainthood that resides in each of us...and all of us. It's like being a prisoner who has received a pardon, theologian Karl Barth used to say. You are a free person and your freedom is real and will not be taken away. But until you get up and walk through the door of your cell, you remain a prisoner of your own failure to act.

Or, if you don't relate to that image, try this one. There is a check for a million dollars with your name on it down in the fellowship. The money is yours! It will not be taken away! You are a MILLIONAIRE! But until you get up and go down to the fellowship hall and CLAIM the check and cash it and do with it whatever you're going to do with it, you are as poor as if it never existed.

Common sense puts it yet another way: USE IT or LOSE IT, the saying goes. And that is the way it is with SAINTHOOD too, except that we never EVER lose it because God never EVER stops loving us! Once we are a part of the Body of Christ...once we have partaken of his life-giving grace and mercy, symbolized in broken bread and poured cup...we have BECOME SAINTS. Our vocation...our calling from that point on...is to ACT like saints and EXERCISE our sainthood – practicing it to be best of our ability each and every day – precisely BECAUSE we ARE God's saints!

Now, do the Beatitudes sound any different in that light? I hope so. Each phrase delivers a sermon of its own, but read between the lines and this is what you hear:

You are loved...so ACT like it!

You are redeemed...so ACT like it!

You are a saint...so ACT like it!

Live as what you already ARE and you will be blessed with every breath you take...because BLESSEDNESS – which means HAPPINESS...which means JOY...which means FULLNESS OF LIFE – is just what happens when you are being who you were CREATED to be...living the life you were CREATED to live. Which is, by the way, precisely what living in the Kingdom of God is all about, Jesus says...BEING who God calls you to be...the Kingdom of God which ISN'T just somewhere down the road in the by and by of heaven. It is HERE...and NOW...Jesus says...in the reality of THIS life when you begin living the reality God created you to live!

So that is what we are up to today...recognizing our sainthood...remembering the saints who have gone before us and the saints who are US today...ALL of us together in the COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS.

Can you feel what a crowd we are today?

Mary and Joseph and their boy Jesus...

The Apostles: Peter and Andrew...James and John...and

Thomas – the one they call Doubting...

Saint Paul...Saint Francis...and Saint Augustine...

Saint Anne...Saint Elizabeth...and Saint Louis

Saint Butch Crawfis...Saint Tom Forsythe...Saint Ed Kindell...and Saint Ben Peters...

Saint Louise Underwood...Saint Bertie Mills...Saint Miriam Hannaway...Saint Marcia

Lane...and Saint Toni Cox.

Saint YOU...and Saint ME...and Saint ALL of our loved ones – both living in this life and living with God in the Kingdom of Heaven – both the Kingdom of Heaven that exists here on earth...and the one that exists with God in the life that is yet to be.

We are ALL “Saints of the Lord”.

We are ALL God's beloved.

We are ALL invited to the Table of our Lord to share in the Communion of the Saints.

WHY? WHY are we “Saints of the Lord?”

WHY are we God’s beloved?

WHY do we get to dine at the table among the Saints of God?

Is it because of our GOODNESS? Is it because of our RIGHTEOUSNESS? Is it because each of us has done THREE MIRACLES?

Heavens NO!

It’s because God LOVES us with an undying love that will NEVER let us go. And no matter whether we are living up to our calling...or whether we’re not...God STILL believes in us and CONTINUES to call us to be what we are: The SAINTS OF GOD! It is God’s CONTINUING gift to us...that though we AREN’T perfect and DON’T always live up to what God calls us to be...God never EVER stops loving us and believing the very BEST about us.

Because God LOVES us...loves us enough to send his very own Son to show us what our lives CAN BE...we ARE God’s SAINTS!

It is then up to US to decide whether we will BE what God says we ARE?

Either way, we are ALWAYS welcome in the Communion of the Saints!

To GOD be the glory, now and always!

Amen...and AMEN!

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