

“The Communion of Saints”
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First Congregational Church
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Hebrews 12:1-2

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.

Matthew 5: 1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness ’sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

**Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets
who were before you.**

The Greek word for Saints is used some 62 times in the New Testament...and most often it is used not to speak of those who have belong to some elite class of holy people...but as a way of naming who we are as those called and redeemed by God’s grace to be holy.

It is not an exclusive term to designate some elite group of holy individuals. It is an inclusive term...a term to remind us who we are and are to be by God's grace.

Jesus was not one to point to heroic figures to make his point about who was blessed by God...or who were among the ones in God's favor...

When he was asked who was the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven he did not present a Priest or a Prophet...he put a child in their midst. Everywhere he went, he pointed to ones who were dismissed, cast-out or otherwise bypassed by the crowds clamoring for his attention...to be the ones who had God's attention...

The poor in spirit
The meek
Those who mourn
The pure of heart
Those who hunger and thirst for what is right
the merciful
the makers of peace
Even those who suffer for what is right....

When we talk of Saints, we are talking of how God's presence, grace, and goodness becomes known in real life...through the lives of real people.

When we talk of SAINTS...it is most often of those lives we hold up as models for everyone. We did not know them firsthand, but they have an enduring, even personal, impact on us...because even though we never knew them we know OF them.

individuals – who stood out and stood up to the tragedy of the world and held forth in some heroic way against the forces arrayed against them and bore witness to another world...another way of being in the world...that pointed to another possibility,

From ancient times, we remember the likes of:
Moses & Miriam; Abraham & Sarah
We remember all those who were Prophets & Apostles...

In more modern times, we remember people such as
Francis & Clare of Assisi; Catherine of Sienna; Martin Luther; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Oscar Romero; Desmond Tutu; Nelson Mandela; Mather Theresa; Dorothy Day; &
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Then there is another group of saints we recall...those we hold in special, personal regard because of how their lives *directly* shaped our own...We know them firsthand...their names, faces, their voices and words, their deeds...we know them and they know us...we can see them seeing us. We remember these individuals because of how, in some way, they mediated life to us, they made a way for us...cared for us, kept company with us, and, however imperfectly, loved us...

As the hymn we sing from time to time puts it, the "held the Christ light for us..."

The writer Frederick Buechner put it this way:

There come moments, I think, even in the midst of all our cynicism and worldliness and childishness, maybe especially then, when there is something about the saints of the earth that bowls us over a little. I mean real saints. I mean saints as men and women who are made not out of plaster and platitude and moral perfection but out of human flesh. I mean saints who have their rough edges and their blind spots like everybody else but whose lives are transparent to something so extraordinary that every so often it stops us dead in our tracks. Light-bearers. Life-bearers.

Faith is something that gets handed on to us...not by blood but by life, through life. These are the ones who brought faith to life for us, the one who give it a unique expression...not by being someone they are not...but by being thoroughly who they were meant to be.

None of those we have remembered here today would have named or recognized themselves as saints...that is left to us to do...and we do so today not to somehow smooth out the rough edges, we have not come to pretend they were something they were not, to touch up the narratives of their lives by air brushing out all the blemishes of glaring imperfection....

It is in God that we remember them...and that, with them, our lives find their fullness in God...they remain among the cloud of witnesses we look to as we seek run the race set for each of us...

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Do you ever have this feeling that you are loosing track of time? The past feels lost to us...the future feels more threatening and inviting...the best we can do is hunker down in the present..a present that feels increasingly precarious.

The past, present and future become dislocated and we can feel lost in time...or time is lost to us.

When we come here, however unimpressive we may do it on any given Sunday – our prayers, our songs, our reading of the Scriptures, our speaking and listening and greeting one another, our breaking of bread, we step into a larger world than the one that is readily available to us – it's not less real...it's more real because it is longer and larger and deeper and more true than anything we could conceive on our own...

We can't do this alone...which is why we need saints...They remind us how the past lives on, and informs and opens up the present beyond what we would otherwise see, and fills us with anticipation for what is yet to be. In them, and our remembrance of them, past, present and future are mended.

It is here that we take hold again and again of that inconceivable hope that all that all is broken will one day be mended, all that is sick will be healed, all that is lost will be found.

When I think of how the our imagination of reality is made right by what we do here together, I am reminded of the Native American take on our life on the earth I heard several years ago. It is common, even natural, for us to imagine that we walk on top of the earth...and with that comes a certain posture of domination and control...over the earth. Native American's, on the other hand, think of the surface of the earth at the place where the sky meets the earth. So, we walk not on top of the earth but on the bottom of the sky. It's a whole different orientation towards reality. It's an orientation that is more fitting with the orientation befitting a church that remembers and includes the Communion of Saints!

Several years ago, I visited churches in Guatemala and learned about a tradition in Central American Congregations...a way of remembering those who were no longer with them. Their names would be and after every name, someone would say, "Presenté" which means present, here, with us.

This act of remembrance took on special significance when they were in the midst of brutal civil wars in which members congregations would be "disappeared" by Government or rebel forces. This act of remembrance became for them an act of resistance against the brutality and power of their regimes...but also against an ultimately tragic view of life...it became a witness to the enduring love of God that is stronger than death...

In a moment, I will collect your cards you filled out earlier with the names of your "saints" and as gather at the Table, I will read the names your have written, one by one. and...when you hear the name you have written read, I want the person who wrote it to call out "Presenté" ...and we will bear witness to the cloud of witnesses that accompany us...we will bring into view the Communion of Saints.

Today, especially, I want us to remember that this table is situated between heaven and earth...the act of breaking bread and sharing the cup is an act of anticipation of the life that is yet to be and of solidarity with those who have gone before us and who now belong to the cloud of witnesses urging us on. Together with them, we belong to God...

Thanks be to God! Amen.