

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended into heaven,

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again 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.

"On 'The Communion of Saints'" (Apostles' Creed)

This morning we recited the Apostles' Creed, which is one of the two creeds that outline the key tenets of the for Christians. The other, of course, is the Nicene Creed,¹ which we recite most Sundays; it is similar to the Apostles' Creed in many ways, but adds in some explanation of both the Trinity and the nature of Christ as both human & divine. But the Apostles' Creed officially became part of the Western Church's liturgy² around the 9th century³ and is considered the baptismal creed, so we use it on Sundays when there's a baptism.

But how are we to engage these Creeds as the Church today? As I said, they outline the key tenets of the faith - indeed, they inform and provide guardrails for how we read & interpret scripture. But I think they are often viewed simply as theological truths that we need to agree with cognitively - intellectual - in order to be a Christian. But this can miss what it really means for us to "believe in" something: we believe in something (in the biblical sense) when it makes a difference in how we live our daily lives: in the case of the truths the Creeds affirm: when believe in them when they impact how we how we understand & engage with God, as well as one another, and the decisions we make. For example, the truth that Jesus is "God's only son...conceived by the Holy Spirit" means that His life on earth (the way He lived and treated people) shows us what God is like: God's attitude toward us and how to love other people like God does; and it makes a huge difference when we live our lives like this is true. The fact that Jesus "will come again to judge the living and the dead," - if we believe it - will impact how we live, knowing that even though we will be forgiven, we will still be held to account for the earthly decisions we make, and have to make wrongs right. And so on.

So, we only begin to really "believe in" any tenets of the Creeds when they begin to make a difference in how we live. So, what then about this line "the Communion of the Saints"? Well, this line of the Creed is probably the most difficult to know how to live out because there is a lot of confusion - and debate even - about what it really means and refers to. So, that's what I want to get into this morning - given that it is *All Saints' Sunday* - I want to explore a bit of why there is some confusion and debate about what it is - what it means - and then make our way to the good news that it is through our belief in the Communion of Saints - through believing not in word, but in action - that Christ (intends to) heal us of our separation from Himself & others caused by sin & death. #

¹ The Nicene Creed was ratified in the 4th Century.

² The Eastern Orthodox Church affirms the Nicene Creed but does not use the Apostles' Creed.

³ Some contend it was as early as the 8th century, others that it was as late as the 11th Century.

Beginning with the meaning of this line - what “the Communion of Saints” refers to - the Church through history has vacillated a bit about what this line refers to, and frankly some debate about its meaning continues even today. And let me explain why, drawing from the scholarship of William Donovan.⁴ This part gets a little nerdy, so I’ll try to be pretty succinct. As I note in your bulletin, the phrase “Communion of Saints” comes from the Greek *koinonia ton hagion* or the Latin *sanctorum communionem*. But the ambiguity here is that both of these are literally translated “Communion of the Holy”, which begs the question “holy” what? You see, there is no subject for ‘holy’ that is explicit here, and so it could mean “holy people” - that is, ‘saints’, as it is translated today, or even God, who is of course holy - or it could mean “holy things”, in which case it would most likely refer to Holy Communion.

Well, there is evidence that over the centuries this phrase has been understood in both ways. The phrase of these two words together doesn’t appear until the fourth Century. And when it does, one of the earliest Christians to use it is no less than St. Augustine, who seems to be referring to the sacrament of Holy Communion (!). But each word - *koinonia* and *hagio* (communion and holy) - is found separately, on their own, in different places in the Bible. And in those instances, *koinonia* (this Greek word for Communion) seems to most typically refer to the unity of baptized believers with one another or God, and when Paul uses *hagion* the context indicates he’s referring to saints in the sense of all believers. St Paul indicates all believers are “holy ones” - are saints - not because of anything we’ve done but because of what Christ our Lord has done for us.⁵

However, the meaning of “saints” already began to shift in the first few centuries after scripture was written. And that is because more and more Christians were martyred for their faith - Christianity was illegal in the Roman empire for 300 years and provoked brutal persecutions. So the label of saint came to refer to - or be more reserved for - believers who had died for their faith, what we call “glorified saints”. Over time, it came to be that living believers were only considered ‘saints’ insofar as they imitated the glorified saints.

Well, in the fourth century and beyond, this idea starts to develop that these saints who had died *can help* believers on earth, in the very least by interceding upon our behalf with the Lord.⁶ So, while this Latin phrase now in the Creed (*sanctorum communionem*) had appeared and seemed to at first refer to Holy Things, the sacrament of Holy Communion, as the Middle Ages went on “*communing* with the *saints*” came to refer to pursuing the help of these glorified saints. And whether you as a Christian today believe that is possible or not, it became a significant element of Christian spirituality in the Middle Ages to pray to and venerate glorified saints: many believers would even go on pilgrimage to the locations where glorified saints had died or to relics - like the bones of certain martyrs - for healing and connecting with God. And *these* sorts of practices are what the Communion of Saints had come to mean. To many of our sensibilities, it has sorta gone off the rails.

Well, when we come to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, which we talked about last week, that’s what they thought. They viewed believers’ engagement with glorified (dead) saints as an idolatry having replaced going to Jesus, because people were often praying to saints *but not* Christ. So this way that the Communion of Saints had come to be emphasized (in what is now the Roman Catholic Church) was completely rejected by the Protestant Reformers. And they taught that “the Communion of Saints” meant a combination of what each of the words seem to refer to when they appear in scripture: as *all baptized believers* - with an emphasis on living believers - who share in common with one another their relationship to Christ. Of course, this makes the line in the Creed a bit redundant with the one that

⁴ Rev. William T. Donovan, “The Theological Notion of the Communion of Saints and the Personalist Notions of Community in E. Levinas,” Dissertation submitted at Fordham University in New York, April 1998.

⁵ Donovan explains how this is consistent with the OT concept of ‘holy’

⁶ Donovan explains the strong influence of the Roman Patronage system on this development

comes before: “the holy catholic Church: - ‘catholic’ meaning universal. The Protestant understanding of the communion of saints doesn’t sound too different from that. Though, we should note that a fair number of Protestants just rejected using Creeds entirely, so there’s that.

Now, I know I may have lost some of y’all by now, but the big take away here is that there’s been a whole lot of variance in Church history about what the “Communion of Saints” refers to and what sort of difference *believing in it* can make in believers lives: what actions “belief in it” should lead us to take. Well, the good news is that it is through our belief in the Communion of Saints that Christ intends to heal us of our separation from Himself & others caused by sin & death. And so, with the rest of my time, I want to explain how believing in the Communion of Saints (in action) can make this sort of difference in our lives.

I should say that, as far as our tradition of Anglicanism today, the most common Anglican view is that ‘saints’ refers to “holy people” in the sense of all believers here on earth *as well as* those who have died in Christ. And the “communion of saints” refers to a spiritual union all of us have in Christ and in worship of Him (whether on earth or in paradise).⁷ Now, I personally think a compelling case can be made that the Communion of Saints is best understood as including both the Sacrament of Holy Communion and our union with God & all believers dead & alive - that all of this is intertwined in that line of the Creed. But even if we land on this sort interpretation of the Communion of the Saints, **the reality is that believers gathering for Holy Communion - the Sacrament of these ‘holy things’ - is the best way these relational connections can be difference-making in our lives.** In other words, I’m saying that gathering for Holy Communion - or really the whole Eucharist Service (word & sacrament) is a gift from Jesus to make the relational aspects of the Communion of the Saints a life-changing reality.

Now, when it comes to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, it first of all is meant to realign our hearts to rest in God’s love and forgiveness and presence with us. In the very least, these elements of bread and wine *represent* Christ’s body and blood given in love on the cross and for forgiveness of our sin. Although most Anglicans affirm that scriptures like John 6 (we read today) teach it is more than a remembrance: that this Sacrament is a mysterious but tangible way that we communion with the Risen Christ: a tangible connection for us as embodied creatures, who otherwise have to relate to our Lord apart from our five senses.

So, this sacrament is a way we tangibly humble ourselves before the Lord. But it is also a means for spiritually uniting with other baptized believers who aren’t physically present with us. Whether because of death, geographical distance, or even being in different denominations or traditions, our participation in Holy Communion is a way we physically affirm our spiritual connection to them in the Lord.

⁷ From the ACNA Catechism *To Be A Christian*:

97. Who are the saints?

The saints are all those in heaven and on earth who have faith in Christ, are set apart to God in Christ, are made holy by his grace, and live faithfully in him and for him. (Ephesians 1:1; Revelation 7:9-15)

98. What does the word “communion” mean?

The word “communion” means being “one with” someone else in union and unity. Christians use it to refer to the relationship of the three Persons within the one being of God, to our union with all three Persons through our union with Christ, and to our relationship with one another in Christ. (John 17:20-21)

99. What is the “communion of the saints”?

The communion of the saints is the unity and fellowship of all those united in one Body and one Spirit in Holy Baptism, both those on earth and those in heaven. (Ephesians 4:4-5, Hebrews 12:1).

100. How is the communion of the saints practiced?

It is practiced by mutual love, care and service, and by worshiping together where the word of the Gospel is preached and the sacraments of the Gospel are administered.

101. How are the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven joined?

All the worship of the Church on earth is a participating in the eternal worship of the Church in heaven. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

- The scriptures teach that believers who have died in the Lord are worshipping the Lord in eternity. So, by engaging in the corporate worship of our Sunday Eucharist, we are joining in on their eternal worship. And scripture teaches that this meal is a foretaste of the banquet we will all one day enjoy together after He returns.
- Then, in regard to believers on earth, but who are not present with us due to geography or being part of another denomination, we act out our unity in Christ by sharing in this sacrament *wherever we are*, affirming that the kingdom of God includes people of all nations and different styles of worship or convictions about secondary matters ((adiaphora)) of the faith.

So, if the Communion of Saints is about our unity with believers who are not bodily present with us for whatever the reason, Holy Communion blesses us with a tangible reminder of our connection (in Christ) with all believers regardless of death or disagreement - that Christ is still holding all of us together in His love. The good news is that it is through our belief in the Communion of Saints - through believing not in word, but in action - that Christ intends to heal us of our separation from Himself & others caused by sin & death. #

But the Communion of Saints highlights not only our unity in Jesus with all believers everywhere from every age, perhaps even more importantly it highlights how Christ invites us into fellowship with one another right here in the local parish. Back in September,⁸ I talked about how we as humans have been made to live in community. We were *created for* relationships with others and to live in interdependence with one another as we navigate life in this world. But what hinders such community for us is sin: ways we have been hurt or that we've sinned ourselves can often cause us to give up on community or relationships that we once cherished, or give up on certain forms of community altogether. Indeed, sin destroys community: it isolates and divides us from our fellow man. But Jesus is always at work in our lives to heal this. And, part of the way He does that is by calling us to gather together for this sacramental meal. The Church is meant to be the community where Jesus overcomes the factors that divide people out there - such as class, race, gender, wealth, education - and we all come together in Him on an equal ground before the cross.⁹

But to enjoy this equality and fellowship in the Lord, it is not enough that we merely *gather*. So, Holy Communion doesn't just convene us as saints, no, it also *teaches us* and *reminds us* how to relate to one another *like saints*: with the love of Christ. As we recount the Lord's death & resurrection, we are reminded how holy community comes about: through loving one another sacrificially as He first loved us, through practicing forgiveness.¹⁰ And yet, it is not enough to *merely know* what loving one another may look like, we still need God's help to live it out. And so, we get down on our knees, put out our hands, and receive Him: an outward sign of our need for His life to love through us. The good news is that it is through our belief in the Communion of Saints - through believing not in word, but in action - that Christ intends to heal us of our separation from Himself & others caused by sin & death.

And so, Jesus invites us to consider today whether there is some way we need more of His gift of faith to *believe* in this *full picture* of the Communion of Saints, not in word but in action. *Each week*, we can approach Holy Communion as an opportunity to be blessed not only by the Lord personally but through this Communion of Saints reality:

- Perhaps some days we need to be reminded through Holy Communion that we are made for community with one another, and while that can be very challenging at

⁸ Sermon on 9/28/25

⁹ Galatians 3:28 - "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

¹⁰ John 15:13 - "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

times, it is worth that challenge and risk to press into it. In a community like this where we grapple with how to love one another - and failing at it and forgiving - is where God most transforms us into the likeness of His Son. So, good for you for choosing to be here today, by the way.

- Perhaps other times what we need most from Holy Communion is God to minister that truth to us that despite differences, or even disagreements with other traditions or denominations, we still have Christ in common, and Christ calls us to look for the good, and to have boundaries where needed, but be committed to loving them as Christ does. And one day all those differences will be overcome and matter very little when we see the Lord together, face to face.
- Or finally, and maybe especially today, we may need God to minister that truth to our hearts about those dear to us who have died in the Lord, that we may grieve their loss, but they are doing a lot better than we are. That the one we now worship as invisible, they already worship face to face.
 - Although, given that today we will be naming this litany of loved ones who have died, I want to say that for those whom we love who did not seem to have faith: don't lose hope. As much as Christians often want to speak with the utmost confidence about the destiny of nonbelievers, none of us are God, and we are often much less merciful than He is. And as much as nonbelievers do miss out on the blessing of life with God here on earth, the truth is that scripture has a much more complex and varied teaching about the post-mortem destiny and possibilities for unbelievers, though I can't get further into that today.¹¹

But a question for each of us to consider is whether any of these ways of believing in the Communion of Saints is deficient in our hearts today, and we can name that need before the Lord as we approach *the altar rail* today.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹ See Bead Jersak's book *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem*, 2010.