

## **Living Into Resurrection: Celebrating Our Heritage**

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Tomorrow night we will do something that I look forward to every year – our Session will sit down with a new class of confirmation students and hear their statements of faith. I know it is a very nerve-wracking time for our young people, but I hope they will also feel the joy and excitement of this event. I know I do, and I think the elders do as well. This is an opportunity for these young people to share with us who Jesus is for them, and where they think Jesus is leading them. It also provides an opportunity for the elders to share their faith journey as well. Invariably, a comment or an insight from a young person lifts up a memory for those of us who are older, and then stories are bouncing all over the place.

I have to admit that this is a special class for me. These are, for the most part, young people who have grown up in this church, mostly over the nine years that I have had the privilege of being their pastor. I have seen them go to Sunday School, lead us in worship during the Summer Spectacular service, and participate with us in various mission activities. Over the last nine months their teacher, Beau Dansizen, has graciously allowed me to stop in from time to time and check in with them. A month or so ago they had a special request from me. They were starting to put their statements of faith together, and as they did that they were looking over their model, the Apostle's Creed. There was one particular line they wanted an expert's take on; but they asked me instead.

What does it mean, they wanted to know, for us to say that we believe in the Communion of Saints?

I have been a pastor long enough to have heard that concern many times. I know the problems that we Protestants have with that line. No, communion of saints does not mean that we pray through the various saints of the church. No, that doesn't mean that we have statues in our church to these folks, although I have known many good Presbyterians who don't mind one bit taking a statue of St. Joseph and burying him upside down in their backyard in an effort to get the place to sell.

I started to tell them what I thought it meant: That the apostle Paul, when he started all of his letters, always began with the greeting "To all the saints at the church in Rome – in Corinth – in Philippi – in Thessalonika..." I shared with them that a 'saint' literally means 'hallowed ones,' people who have been called to be a special community of special people, called by God to do a special work. A saint is not a statue of some super spiritual person. A saint is anyone called, blessed and empowered by God.

Somehow, I didn't feel like that was really getting at it. There was something missing, something really, really important that I wanted to share with these young people who have become a very important part of my life over the years. There was a gift I wanted to give them,

and all that was coming out was stuff they could get from an online Bible study. Not that that's bad – it's just that I wanted to give them something more.

So I did. I gave them a history lesson. Only I didn't tell them about what happened way back when. I gave them a lesson of my life and the saints who have come my way.

I didn't mention them by name. That's always a self-serving activity. People don't know the names of those whose faces come to my mind or your mind when we speak of the communion of saints, and that's okay. We all have our own saints whose names conjure up for us a life well lived in the faith, and I invite you to let those names come to mind, because this is a good Sunday for that.

What I did tell them is what makes communion so special for me. Whenever I am up here, doing this activity which always gives me great joy and satisfaction, I lift up a long prayer of thanksgiving, during which I am sure your minds wander. But as I am going through that prayer, and especially toward the end, I think of them. I remember that our Presbyterian/Reformed understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is not that Jesus is somehow contained within or around the elements, like other traditions do. Our belief is that Christ is spiritually present with us, when this prayer is spoken and the Holy Spirit is invited, encouraged, deeply sought, begged for. Jesus comes to be with us as we remember, break bread and share.

But I deeply believe that Jesus never comes alone. He always brings with him a great cloud of witnesses, those saints of the church who have passed through this life and left us a wonderful legacy of devotion to the church and to the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is not ancestor worship; we are not praying to these people. We remember them, and we count ourselves blessed that they have come our way, that they have shared the love of God with us, that they taught us what eating this meal and engaging in this fellowship is all about. The communion of saints is not some dry doctrine for me; it is a very living and real presence, one which I feel when we celebrate this sacrament, and as I remember those who made the love of Jesus Christ come alive for me.

The only part that tugs at me in a painful sort of way is that they are not here for me to say 'thank you.' Thank you for giving such a rich gift that I could never completely say thank you enough; thank you for being a witness of life so powerful that I still remember kind acts a half-century later (ouch!); thank you for passing the torch to us, the torch of the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

That's why we wanted to have this Sunday; a day to remember those who have stuck it out with the church over a long period of time, who have been – and who continue to be – witnesses of the love and grace of Jesus Christ to and with us. It may seem a little odd to have a group called the "Three-Digit Club" even after you understand that we wanted to come up with some way to honor long-time members of the church, and this seemed to be a good way to do it – to take the first 999 members according to our church's register and lift them up for

celebration. This is not to say that we don't celebrate all of our members. We give praise and thanks for all those whom God has sent our way.

But it is important, I think, to say thank you and pray for God's blessings on those who have made a commitment to the church over the years. When the letter writer to the Hebrews wanted to talk about faith, he or she lifted up stories, stories of those saints of their lives and their tradition they could remember. Like them, we remember the saints of our lives through the stories we tell – of starting this church in the Masonic Temple at the corner of Electric and Lear; of the first Sunday school classes in a member's house over here on the corner of Electric and Jaycox; of the first church building; of the steamy worship services in what is now Hart Hall; the commitment of the congregation in building this sanctuary; Jazz Sunday, Blue Jean Sunday, outdoor worship Sundays. This is all a part of their story, all a part of our story.

Having a Sunday like this is an opportunity to say thank you to all those who have been a beautiful witness to us as we have sought to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. It's also a time for us to remember our place in the communion of saints, and our place in this journey – to teach and to learn, to grow and conserve, to worship and rejoice. But this serves one more purpose – to remember that the ministry of Christ goes on, and on, and on. We may hear all kinds of dire reports about the future of the church. But when the church keeps its eyes on the one who set us on this journey, or this race as the writer to Hebrews puts it, then we will continue to run our race faithfully. Amen.

Text is Hebrews 11:32-12:3  
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