

“Credo, Fourth Series, Part VI: The Communion of Saints”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for June 14th 2020 (2nd Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Colossians 1: 9-14

Having spent the past four weeks pondering four different aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ, four different aspects of the Church fashioned, founded and sustained through the power of the Holy Spirit...

...which is to say the four aspects named in the longer and fuller of the two Creeds, the Nicene, which confesses “one holy, catholic and apostolic church”...

...having, for the past four weeks leaned so heavily upon the Nicene Creed, it is ironic that this morning we not only return to the more succinct Apostles’ Creed, but do so to discover (for only the second time), that we have come face to face with an expression that has no equivalent in the longer Nicene Creed. The first occasion, you may recall, occurred during Holy Week, when the Apostles’ Creed informed us that Jesus Christ--having been “crucified, died and was buried”--**“descended to the dead”**, that latter statement having no equivalent in the Nicene Creed. And now this morning we encounter the phrase “the communion of saints”: a phrase that also has no real equivalent in the Nicene Creed. And yes...for that very reason it would be tempting to note that phrase only in passing...

...to regard it as nothing more than another way of referencing, another way of speaking about the Church...

...and thereby to free ourselves for the weighty matters which still await us in the Creed’s final sentences with their talk of “the forgiveness of sins”, “the resurrection of the body” and “the life-everlasting”. Tempting though that may well be, I cannot regard that as anything other than a mistaken shortcut, not least....

...not least because the Church’s great tradition has tended, for much of its history, to see a further and quite specific notion embedded in the Creed’s talk of “the communion of saints”. After all!

When both of the Creeds--the Apostles’ as well as the Nicene--describe the Church as “catholic”, as “universal”, (at a bare minimum) they are describing the Church’s **spatial** expansiveness: the fact that the church is a more than merely “local” phenomenon. But when the Apostles’ Creed goes on to celebrate “the communion of saints”, the tradition has long heard a powerful hint of the Church’s **chronological** expansiveness: its extension not only in “space” but in “time”. While the scriptural echoes underlying that notion are many, particular attention should be paid to that stretch of the book Hebrews beginning with its poignant 11th chapter, a chapter which celebrates the faithfulness of a small handful of Old Testament figures. At the end of

that sequence, just prior to naming Jesus as the true “founder and perfecter of their faith”, the book assures its readers that they are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses”<sup>i</sup>: an assurance rightly to be regarded not only as an “inter-generational” link but as an explicit link between “heaven and earth”. And yes!

While it might well be possible for us to regard the word “church” as referencing a strictly “human” enterprise...the sphere in which well-intentioned human beings offer their well-intentioned “response” to the good news of Jesus Christ...there can be no evading the extent to which it is God who underwrites the very possibility of a “communion” that extends not only through space but through time. Indeed!

Having acknowledged--over the past four weeks--the “human, all too human” face that the church has so often shown the world...

...above all its “disunity” rather than its “oneness”...

...should we not be especially eager to celebrate the deep “unity”, the “comm-unity” which the Holy God is prepared to underwrite in and through “the communion of saints”? To regard such “communion” as present reality? To regard such “communion” as our hoped-for destiny in the true fullness of time: when time gives way to eternity? In short: to view the flawed and fractured life of the church and, indeed--the battered and broken life of the world--as caught up in the far more substantial, the far weightier reality that God **has** fashioned and **is** fashioning in and through the communion of saints?

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I have found it intriguing--over the past week...

...intriguing because I had not initially anticipated it...

...I have been intrigued by the fact that the bulk of my focus and energy as I pondered that weighty expression--“communion of saints”--would gravitate toward the **second** of those two weighty words. I assumed, especially in light of last Sunday’s rather dour consideration of the Church’s own troubled seeking after “union”, that I would be only too happy to celebrate the “communion” which God-in-Christ has already accomplished. And yes: there is much there to celebrate! But what struck me early on, over the past seven days, was the fact that the Creed names that “deep” communion quite specifically as the communion of those who have been “sanctified”! Sanctified, as in “sanctus, sanctus, sanctus”! “holy, holy, holy”: a word being used here not of God, but of human beings whose own “holiness” has come to reflect, **genuinely to reflect**, the holiness of God.

And yes! To be perfectly honest...when I review much that transpires within the church let alone that which transpires as part and parcel of the passing human scene, such a notion is rather difficult to take seriously, to take at face-value!. Then again...any notion of a church-united, let alone a church truly catholic--truly universal--, let alone a

church really and truly holy, rests upon the hope that there might indeed exist a human counterpart to the holiness of God: saints (!), saints who might serve as the “building-blocks” of the saintly communion so earnestly named by the Apostles’ Creed. Not that we need to rest such a hope solely on the basis of the Creed! On the contrary!

Scripture itself--the New Testament itself!--has some fairly remarkable ways of describing those who have experienced the renewal, the profound transformation, available to those whose lives have **already** said “yes” to the Gospel, those whose lives already reflect the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, those whose lives are already being re-fashioned by the Spirit, the **Holy** Spirit. And so Paul, in the opening of his letter to the Church at Colossae, makes no effort to hide his expectation that his readers will be empowered *to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*<sup>ii</sup>. Nor, for that matter, does our Lord--in his magnificent Beatitudes--hesitate to presume that there are those of whom it can rightly be said that they are “blessed” because they can rightly be described as *poor in spirit, as peacemakers, as hungering and thirsting for righteousness, as merciful*, indeed as **pure in heart!**<sup>iii</sup> Nor does John--perhaps even more extravagantly--hesitate to assure his readers: *...we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*<sup>iv</sup> Make no mistake about it!

The expectation that those who, in **our** time no less than at the **end of time**, will find themselves in “communion” with the Holy God will (for that very reason) also be those who have come to reflect something of God’s holiness in their own way of being...

...in short, those who can rightly be described as having been “sanctified”, as having become “saints”...

...that expectation is an expectation that can be found woven into the Christian tradition from the outset: from its **scriptural** outset. And therein lies a challenge :a challenge which, frankly, ought to be “felt” by all Christians, but a challenge which is perhaps most fully experienced by those Christians who have been impacted by the legacy of the Reformation. Therein lies a tale...a tale worthy pondering.

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In order to do that, I really have no choice but to lift-up two rather technical sounding words: words which may sound quite forbidding but which can actually shed some light on what it means to speak of those who can rightly be described as “holy ones”, as “saints”. The two words I have in mind? Justification...and sanctification!

The first of those two words was central to the profound--and in many ways the terrifying--spiritual struggle in which a young monk, some 500 years ago, found himself ensnared. That monk’s name, of course, was Martin Luther: whose struggles involved his increasing sense that his fervent spiritual practices, far from bringing him “closer” to God....

...far from “justifying” him in God’s “court”...

...were only serving to further alienate him from God, were only serving to highlight his inescapable wretchedness as a fallen human being: marked not only by his finitude, but by his sinfulness. Having reached the conclusion that there was nothing that he--Martin Luther--could do to put himself “right” with God, his breakthrough came with the realization that God-in-Christ has already done for Martin what he could never have accomplished for himself. When we speak of “justification” that is the miracle to which we refer: the “amazing grace” through which God “saves a wretch like me”. It is, in many ways, the Church’s defining miracle; indeed, in many ways the reality and the experience of such grace can be (and has been!) rightly described as that without which the church would not be able to stand! Not for an instant! Nevertheless!

Nevertheless! The good news of what God has done for us in and through the love made known in Jesus Christ...

...the good news of our having been justified in God’s sight, the good news of our having been put right with God through the Cross of Jesus Christ...

...raises some rather sharp questions about those “wretches” who “once were lost but now are found” in and through the Cross. After all: it is one thing to say that I “was” a wretch when found by God in the midst of my wretchedness. But surely...surely it is an entirely different thing to maintain that I remain entirely the same person **now** that I was back **then**, when first I heard (really and truly **heard**) the good news of God’s love for me. That God is prepared to “take me as I am”, warts and all, is surely a crucial--perhaps **the** crucial--distinguishing mark of the Gospel entrusted to the Church. But do we truly wish to maintain that though we may well remain wretched...

...at least in the sense that we remain as radically dependent upon God at the end of our Christian journey as we were at the start to that journey...

...surely, surely, there is something problematic in the insistence that we remain the same “slobs” at the end as we were at the beginning. And yes...surely...surely...we should want to avoid giving the impression that the church....

...the **one holy, catholic and apostolic Church!**...

...is the sort of fellowship to which Groucho Marx alluded when he insisted that he would not want to belong to any club that would have him as a member. Indeed! To whatever extent it is fair to see the church not only as a “gathering of the wretched” but as the “communion of saints”, it is important to acknowledge that our “justification” by God is not the **entirety** of the story...is surely not the **end** to the story.

That's where that other "big" word--sanctification--comes into play. If it can be said that God, in the process of justifying us, "imputes" to us a righteousness that really isn't ours....

...that God, in a sense, chooses to see the face of Christ when he turns to view our faces...

...then it might also be said that God seeks to "impart" that same "righteousness" to us in and through the righteousness that is really and truly to be found in Christ and--in a sense--to be found alone in Christ. And yet we are called to become true **participants** in that righteousness rather than mere spectators: to become **sanctified**, to genuinely reflect--not only on our lips but in our lives--the holiness of Christ. In short, to become saints! And the obvious danger....

...the obvious danger is that we can find ourselves, precisely at this juncture, right back at the place at which Martin Luther experienced his great crisis. Right at that place where we are going to find ourselves attempting to sanctify ourselves! Right at that place where we are going to return to a "do it yourself" piety; that place where I will now endeavor, all on my own, to become the person I think God wants me to be: flexing my own spiritual muscles, working up my own head of allegedly spiritual steam! Alas! At the end of that dismal road, the best case scenario....

...notice I am describing this as the **best** case scenario...

...is that I will come to recognize that I am no more equipped to work out my own sanctification than I was at working out my own justification. The worst case scenario...

...and this really and truly **is** the worst case scenario...

...is that I will fall into the even worse trap of imagining that I **have** become that righteous saint: not unlike the Pharisee who in his prayers looked with such grave contempt at the tax-collector whose prayers--unbeknownst to that Pharisee--were the ones that had actually managed to be heard at heaven's gate.<sup>v</sup> Far worse...far more problematic: the self-satisfied gaze of the self-anointed saint, than the heart-cry of the one who knows himself to have fallen far short of the mark, even at that awful juncture where they find themselves at the abyss of giving up all hope.

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I find myself returning--perhaps somewhat unexpectedly....

...returning to the sermon I preached a number of weeks back: the first of the four sermons focusing on the church (perhaps, more accurately--including this morning's sermon--the first of five sermons on the church)...

...I find myself returning to that very first sermon, the one on "the church apostolic", the one--in short--which took its bearings from the first chapter of

Acts, in which the risen Christ commissions his disciples to become his apostles or-- more specifically--to become his **witnesses**. And surely...surely to God:

Anyone who has ever been in a courtroom....or anyone who has ever watched a drama that is set in a courtroom...will know, full well, that there are witnesses whose testimony comes to be regarded as credible, side by side with witnesses whose testimony utterly and completely lacks credibility. And far too often...far too often: the church's witness, considered as a whole, lacks precisely the credibility our Lord wishes for it to have. Indeed: go no further than the fact that our church life--through this time of heightened racial mistrust and animosity--for the most part no better reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of our societies, than do any of the other networks and associations within those societies. That is but one instance--though right now an especially critical instance--of a place at which our Christian witness falls short of the mark. And the larger point, of course...

...the larger point--despite the necessary cautions and the much needed caveats--is that the Gospel declaration of our having found full and complete (utterly radical!) justification through Christ--**acceptance in Christ**--remains an incomplete declaration...in the eyes of the world will indeed appear to be an utterly bankrupt declaration, unless...

...unless, at least some of those who have heard those words of acceptance, have begun to exhibit (however tentatively) something of the way of Christ **in their own lives!** Have begun to find the wherewithal to enter on the path of true discipleship: following where their Lord leads them! Have begun the painful process of carrying their cross...in some instances...carrying their multiple crosses: not seeking out suffering in masochistic frenzy but accepting with patience and humility and good-cheer the inevitable suffering that discipleship and yes, life itself offers to all of its children. In short: have begun to undergo the process of renewal, regeneration, transformation that is best described by that word "sanctification": the process--really the miracle--through which the worst of sinners can find themselves the holiest of saints, all along...all along...and at every step of the way:

Acknowledging that the work of sanctification, no less than the work of justification, is **God's work**, is God's doing: that their privilege is the privilege of participating in the work of God, the way of Christ, the movement of the Holy Spirit. Acknowledging that they recognize, even on their very best day, their close kinship with the tax-collector: quietly beating his breast and asking for God's mercy. And yet, nevertheless, recognizing that the same grace (sola gratia!) that "saved a wretch like me" is the grace that can work the further miracle: "I once was blind, but now I see!" Above all: in the grateful recognition that the same grace that calls us to be Christ's witnesses has the power to render us **credible** witnesses. In short, the power to make of us saints: those worthy to be in communion not only with one another, but to enter into communion with the Holy One, the Holy Three, the Holy God.

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Permit a final thought...a somewhat ironic thought given the extent to which this sermon has leaned (**heavily** leaned) on the insights of Karl Barth.<sup>vi</sup> Despite the fact that large swaths of the Church Universal tend to regard Mary as the first thought and the last word when it comes to “saint-hood”, Barth--no doubt as part of his aversion to what he regarded as the excesses of the Catholic Church’s devotional practices where Mary is concerned--never allows the name of Mary to cross his lips (not even once!) in the course of his lengthy (and quite extraordinarily helpful) treatment of “sanctification”.

Realizing full well that he is certainly no match for Barth in matters theological, I nevertheless had a hard time (this past week) shaking Paul McCartney’s words: “When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, ‘Let it be’.”<sup>vii</sup> And, of course, the “let it be” by which that song is known bears a close relationship to the “fiat”--the “let it be to me according to your Word”--pronounced by the Blessed Virgin when the archangel Gabriel comes knocking at her door. And yes--without for a moment denying that the process of sanctification is first and foremost a process in which the key role is played and the essential work is undertaken **by God**....

...it is surely accurate also to insist that when it comes to **our** role, it may well be that Mary’s “fiat”--or, if you please, Hamlet’s insistence that “the readiness is all”<sup>viii</sup>--is not only the **best** that we can offer but remains, when push comes to shove, the **only** thing which we can offer. That we too will discover--as Mary came to discover and yes, as all of God’s saints must surely eventually discover--that their “simple but far from easy” yes to God (offered in the beginning) comes to define them “in the end”. That their yes...offered in the midst of human brokenness, entails nothing less than an invitation for the God of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to launch a never-ending process of reclamation, renewal and transformation: a process whose end could not be more auspicious!

Auspicious! As they come, these women and men, to take their place--and play their part--in the radiant circle of those who have come to discover the radical depth of the “amazing grace” that had captured them in the beginning! Finding their place at the banquet table where their joy--in the bosom of God’s joy--will richly and truly be complete. In short: discovering that their stories have become a part of God’s story....and that they have found a true home in that most rare of communions: the good and glorious communion of the saints

And glory be to God: whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation: in the Church, and in Christ Jesus. Now and forever more. Thanks be to God!!

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<sup>i</sup> Hebrews 12: 1,2

<sup>ii</sup> Colossians 1:9-14

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 5: 1-12

<sup>iv</sup> 1st John 3: 2

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<sup>v</sup> Luke 18: 9-14

<sup>vi</sup> Church Dogmatics, Paragraph 66: "The Sanctification of [Humanity]"

<sup>vii</sup> Though it is well known that the initial inspiration for the song comes from a dream encounter McCartney had with his mother, Mary--who had died when he was 14--he has never sought to disparage those who hear the song's clear "religious" overtones. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let\\_It\\_Be\\_\(Beatles\\_song\)#Origins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let_It_Be_(Beatles_song)#Origins)

<sup>viii</sup> *Hamlet, Act 5, scene ii*