

July 14, 2019

Communion of Saints

Hebrews 12:1-2

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 12:2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

1. Church As the Communion of Saints

The Apostles' Creed continues the word "Communion of Saints" right after "the holy and catholic church." By that, we say that "church" is "the communion of saints." "The communion of saints" is a term that has replaced "the church".

1 Corinthians 1:1-2 says, "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:" Here, "the church of God that is in Corinth" is called those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints."

When we say "saints", we think of superior people such as the apostles Peter and Paul, St. Augustine and St. Francis of Assisi. It makes us embarrassing if we are called "saints." However, the term "saints" used in the Bible does not refer only to persons who have various virtues. People who were forgiven of their sins and cleansed,

even though they were far from them, are also called “saints.” In the church of Corinth, there were disputes between the sects, litigation between the believers, sexual immorality and idol worship, confusion in the sacrament and worship, denial of the resurrection of the dead. Even in such a church, the believers are called “saints.” They are “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints.” We can see the great grace of Jesus Christ in that we are called “saints.”

Therefore, the word “communion of saints” means that the church is not a gathering of perfect people, but of imperfect human beings, who are forgiven and cleansed by the grace of God and awaits the time of completion. It is understood from the Apostles’ Creed that “the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting” follow after “the communion of the saints.” In other words, “the communion of saints” means to be a fellowship to live in “the eternal life,” waiting for “the resurrection of the body” based on “the forgiveness of sins.” Let’s learn this again with the next message.

The church is the “communion of saints”, and “the communion of saints” is the church. The church has many weaknesses and shortcomings, even if it is called “the holy church”, as church members are called “saints” but they are not perfect as saints. So there are people who come to the church for their ideals and leave the church seeing and hearing the opposite thing in the church.

What is said in the preaching and what the church people practice is so different. There are divisions in the church, and when new people come, they pull each other. Many people are reluctant to do things, such as those with social status or special skills being treated, but those who are less prominent or socially vulnerable are not even

able to look at it. I understand that feeling well. If you feel nothing in such a state, you would think of the church as a mere human group. God calls the church “the holy church” and the believers “saints” because God hopes that both the church and the believers will be transformed into holiness. As the church seeks to be holy and seeks that the believers be sanctified, there is “the communion of saints” there, even if it is imperfect.

2. Sharing the Sacred Things

The term “saints” also means “sacred things.” Certainly, there are problems and mistakes in the church. It may seem like the church is worse than this world. But even then, if that is truly the church of Christ, there are things that are not in this world, things that this world can not give, that are “the sacred things.” If the church abandoned that “the sacred things”, it would no longer be a church, but if it kept them, “the communion of saints” would live there.

So what is the “the sacred things” God gave to the church? Aren’t there many things that have the word “holy?” “The Holy Bible” is so. “The Holy Spirit” is so. That’s what the “The Holy Communion” is. The chapel is “Sanctuary,” that is, “the Holy Place.” Also, “faith” is holy, as it is called “the most holy faith” (Judas 1:20). And the gifts given by the Holy Spirit are also the sacred things. The church has “the holy name” of Jesus Christ. The fact that Christ is with us by the Holy Spirit is called “the Holy Presence.”

The things in the Kingdom of Heaven are the sacred things, and the church is the place where the sacred things are shared. People come to church in order to get things that can not be obtained in the world.

Therefore, the church does not try to attract people with secular things, but wants to point out and offer “the sacred things” to people. Many Christians believe that “people will keep away from the sacred things, so we must provide the secular things.” It is not right idea. People’s souls are satisfied only by touching “the sacred things,” and if there is no one in the church, people leave the church on the contrary. I think that it is the mission of the church that Christians first seek “the sacred things,” and by being filled with them, they can point out “the sacred things” and share it with people.

Paul says in Romans 1:11-12: “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you-- that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.” The gifts of faith and the Spirit can be shared, and the church is where they are shared. Our faith and gifts are further enriched by sharing, which allows us to grow spiritually.

The Heidelberg Catechism asked us in the question 55: “What do you understand by “the communion of saints?” The answer is “First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and joyfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.” The Catechism teaches that in sharing together with the grace that Christ has given and gifts with other people, there is “the communion of saints.” I think this is a very good definition. The church is a place to share the sacred things together. The church grows by sharing them.

3. The Church in Heaven and on Earth

Thirdly, “the communion of saints” refers to “the communion” between the Church of Heaven and of the Earth. In the time of the Apostles’ Creed was created, there were severe persecutions. Many Christians have been martyred. The fellow Christians who sang praise and prayed together until last week left one by one. Of course, those left on the earth came to look up at heaven. Because it is understood that the people who passed away are with the Lord Jesus in heaven, and that there is a church of those who passed away.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church and the church is the body of Christ. Each believer is each organ of Christ’s body. Christ is in heaven, we are on earth. We are the hands and feet of Christ and do Christ’s will on earth. But at the same time, each one of Christ’s bodies is of course not only supported by Christ, but also by others, as each of us is supported by someone.

The church is in heaven, and the church in heaven and the church on earth are one. As Christ who is the Head is in heaven, I think that the saints in heaven are closer to Christ and support the saints on earth. Because the saints in heaven are perfect, we can neither do nor need to do anything for them in heaven. Rather, I think, we need to the help of heavenly saints. In one body of Christ, heavenly saints and saints on Earth are associated, and saints on earth are supported by saints in heaven. The believers of the Early Church understood that better than we today.

One of the things that heavenly saints are doing for us, the saints on earth, is “the testimony.” Hebrews 11 bears the testimony of the Old Testament saints who lived in faith, beginning with Abel, to

Samuel and the Prophets. Chapter 12 says that these people are “a cloud of witnesses” and surround us. The Old Testament saints and the New Testament saints are in the same church in heaven and give “the testimony” to the believers on earth.

So what do they testify? In Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And 11: 6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Heavenly saints prove that “God will reward those who seek him.” One of the aspects of the faith is to seek as God’s salvation and reward in the suffering world. Since the believers believed that “God would reward those who seek him,” they could walk through difficult times. But the rewards of the earth that the believers saw were only partial. Some people had to suffer instead because of the faith. But the saints are now rewarded in heaven. It proves from the heavens that “God will reward.”

Jesus told Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) Jesus Christ has proclaimed that the church will win the gates of hell. Persecutors tried to destroy the church by killing believers. But the believers were in heaven, where they became witnesses to the churches on earth, and the churches were encouraged by the witnesses of heaven, and became the witnesses of Christ. Persecution has enlarged the church in heaven, and opened the door of heaven for the saints. The martyrs have not perished. In heaven they are surrounded by peace, glory and joy. The heavenly church testifies “the church has won the gates of hell.”

We inherited the faith from heavenly Saints. Even so, we must be grateful, but not only that, the saints in heaven have shown how to work by faith and how to live the faith through their lives. We have been taught, encouraged, and guided not only by the believers who appear in the Bible and the believers who leave the name in history, but also through the lives of our close friends of faith.

Hebrews 12:2 teaches, “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” Our eyes should be directed straight to Jesus. However, if you look up at Jesus, you will naturally see “a cloud of witnesses” near Jesus. You can hear the voice of the witnesses of heavenly saints. By paying attention to and listening to the testimonies of the saints in heaven, we can see Jesus Christ himself better.

The church may fall down, be misled by false teachings, and not be a true church. But as long as the church on earth keeps the communion of the church in heaven through the body of Christ, it will breathe again and again and create “the communion of saints” in this world. Believe in that, look up to heaven, and praise the Lord Jesus Christ with the church in heaven.

(Prayer)

Jesus Christ, the head of the church, build up our church not by human connections but by the “communion of saints.” Make it a place to share “the sacred things.” Help us to look up to the church in heaven, imitate heavenly saints, and with heavenly saints, praise you. We ask this trusting in the Father and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.