

Susan Gascho-Cooke
October 30, 2016
On Being the Communion of Saints
Ephesians 1:15-19

“I heard of your love toward all the saints,” Paul says to the church at Ephesus in today’s passage. “I hear *your* love toward all the saints,” I say to *you* this morning. I see the tenderness with which you light the candles for these beloveds. I see you. You love.

Having just spoken their names, or lit a candle for them, or simply remembered their faces or voices where we sat, they are with us here in this place. I think especially of the saints of this congregation, who once sat among us:

Emma Hess
Daryl Garber
Paul Leatherman
Kate Couturier
Phil Detweiler
Dieter Jacobs
Rachel Stauffer
Gwen Peachey
Glen Lapp
Marc Siemens
Ferd Doermer
Bonnie Gingrich

Some of you knew some or all of these CMCL saints. Some of you may never have met any of them. Possibly you have heard stories of them. Without a doubt, you are part of a community that each of those people helped to shape, so in that sense, they are known by us all. They are *with* us.

God seems always to be trying to tell us and show us, how “*with*” we are. We were made in the context of a vast creation – we were not made alone, but *with* all of creation. God-who-is-Love was *with* us as a pillar of flame and a cloud, as the children of Israel wandered for 40 years. God-who-is-Love even tried to be *with* us in the form of laws on stone tablets on Mt Sinai. God-who-is-Love was *with* Elijah in that still small voice, and God was and is *with* us in the nagging persistence of the prophets. God tried to show us just how *with* us God could be by being a human *with* us, as Jesus who lived *with* us and died *with* us. Jesus spent his life teaching us how to be *with* one another. And the Holy Spirit, in all her mysterious ways, is *with* us. So many ways for God-who-is-Love to be *with* us...

It shouldn’t be so surprising, then, that the love of those who have gone before us can also be present *with* us, even after the separation of death. After all, being a saint, in the words of well-known preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, isn’t about being “famous, or perfect, or dead. You just have to be you ... [and] to love ...” (1)

“What makes a saint? Extravagance. Excessive love, flagrant mercy, radical affection, exorbitant charity, immoderate faith, intemperate hope, inordinate love. None of which is an achievement, a badge to be earned or a trophy to be sought; all are secondary by-products of the one thing that truly makes a saint, which is the love of God,

which is membership in the body of Christ, which is what all of us, living and dead, remembered and forgotten, great souls and small, have in common. Some of us may do more with that love than others and may find ourselves able to reflect it in a way that causes others to call us saints, but the title is one that has been given to us all by virtue of our baptisms. The moment we rose dripping from the holy water we joined the communion of saints, and we cannot go back any more than we can give back our names or the blood in our veins.” (2)

And there is the significance of All Saint’s Day: the *communion* of saints. The communion we can have with the saints. The communion that cannot be broken, because the connection is through the love of Christ, from which nothing can separate us. It is an extension of the claim Christians have made over the centuries (no matter how literally or metaphorically we understand it) that meaning and love and life go on ... that somehow, death is not the end of things. “O grave, where is thy victory?” And so we do not just celebrate the lives of the saints, but our ongoing communion *with* them. The power and significance they still have on our lives today; the inspiration they still are. The love that still flows. And that love, that connection, can be exactly the reminder that we need of the connection we each have to God-who-is-Love, the Ground of Being.

Their *with-us-ness* helps us remember God-with-us. It’s no wonder that centuries of humans have turned to saints, and the images and stories of them, to re-start the flow of divine connection, when abstract connection is simply too intangible.

So, I invite you today to think not only of those you have loved and known in intimate friend and family ways, but to remember also those who have gone before you in some significant, maybe larger way. Perhaps someone who blazed a trail that has allowed some opportunity or insight for you; someone who opened your eyes or heart through their example or actions or words. I think of the women who have gone before me, even thousands of years before. Thecla, pictured on your bulletin cover (3), is believed to have been a very early Christian and follower of Paul. In the Byzantine church she is considered a saint. In this fresco she appears as clearly as the stories about her, which is to say not clearly at all -- identity uncertain, legacy chipped away at by time and neglect rather than careful tending of her name, her image or her story. But she survives in this image. She is a survivor. And I honor her among my communion of saints.

Who is a saint who has gone before you?

Now that you have imagined that face, I invite you to put a frame around it in your mind’s eye. Put it on your inner wall in a special place. Imagine the name printed underneath in a scroll: Saint _____. Welcome the communion with that saint, both now and for the future.

Now, I invite you to think of someone who has loved and worked and inspired you here, at CMCL, if this is your church home. This person can still be alive ... maybe you’ve sat beside them on a committee; maybe you’ve folded up tables with them after a potluck; maybe they took over ushering for you at the last minute; maybe you’ve said a prayer for them when a prayer concern email went around; maybe they sent you a card; maybe they mentored your child or taught Christian Ed; maybe you sat beside them as you each shared at an Evening of Remembrance here; maybe they were the first person to introduce themselves to you; maybe their life or words have inspired you in some particular way.

Now that you have imagined that face, I invite you to put a frame around it in your mind's eye. Put it on your inner wall in a special place. Imagine the name printed underneath in a scroll: Saint _____. Welcome the communion with that saint, both now and for the future. You may well be imagining that person laughing at the thought of being called a saint! Remind them that it's not a reward for perfection, but an acknowledgment of love witnessed in action. Welcome the communion with that saint, both now and for the future.

And finally, I invite you to think of someone *for whom* you are here today. For whom you are showing up, to be community, to be church, because you want church to be there for them. In a recent *Christian Century* article, Isaac Villegas, pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship wrote the following ... He was reflecting on why he had chosen to make what some saw as controversial stands for inclusivity in a denomination and a conference that did not support this. “*Who was he for?*” was his framing question.

Sitting in those boardrooms—my head echoing with the voices of our constituencies, my mind recalling all the relevant theological arguments—I would remind myself why I was there. I remembered what I was supposed to be doing with the power delegated to me. I thought about Sundays at my church, the hour before worship begins, when I join the kids to sing about God. We shout out lyrics about Abraham and Sarah, about being children of God; we dance around the front of the sanctuary, sticking out our arms and legs, twisting and turning: ‘Right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, nod your head, turn around, sit down!’ ...

In a room with other church leaders, discerning policies to guide our denomination, I would think of the children in my Sunday school class. I thought of what it means for our church—our congregations and our denomination—to be a safe place for them to explore the mysteries of God, a healthy place for them to learn who God created them to be. ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,’ says Jesus, ‘for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ If heaven belongs to the children, then our church should, too.

When I think of my Sunday school children, church politics gets personal. I want a church that is for them, for all of them, even the kids who will find out that they are LGBTQ. I want them to know that God made them the way they are, that God's love is in the way they love—that God didn't make a mistake. ...

I love the kids at my church. My votes, my engagement in church politics, have been for them. I'm on their side. I want a church that wants them, and I don't want them ever to doubt that.

*... Denominational leadership is complicated... I've been at the table when we've made decisions that would hurt people I love, decisions that hurt people in my congregation. What guided me through the haze of decision making was one question, a voice always in my head: *Who are you for?* ...*

If you want my answer, you're welcome to join the kids in my class on Sunday. (4)

How might you answer that question: Who are you for?

Who are you church for? Is there someone for whom it feels especially imperative that they have assurance of God's love for them? Someone you are committed to there being a church for? Someone who might not yet know or believe themselves to be part of

the communion of saints?

Now that you have imagined that face, or perhaps those faces, I invite you to, in your mind's eye, put their image in a locket that rests next to your heart. Imagine their name(s) engraved inside that locket. Saint _____. Welcome the communion with them, both now and for the future.

This is the communion of the saints, the communion of *all* saints, which, dearly beloveds, includes you. You ... we ... are the communion of saints.

For I have heard of your faith and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of Jesus Christ, the Mother of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know her, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which she has called you, what are the riches of her glorious inheritance among the saints. (Ephesians 1:15-19)

Amen.

(1) Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Handkerchiefs," in *Home By Another Way*, p. 208.

(2) Barbara Brown Taylor, *Weavings*, Sept.-Oct. 1988, pp. 34-35, quoted in *Synthesis*

(3) photo by EMU professor Linford Stutzman, used with permission.

<http://emu.edu/now/ports-of-paul/files/2012/10/Med-May-June-2011-0443.jpg>

(4) Isaac Villegas, "A church for the kids." *The Christian Century*, October 10, 2016.

(October 26, 2016 print edition). <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-10/church-kids>