
I Believe in the (Contagious!) Communion of Saints

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
All Saints Sunday

I believe in the communion of saints. In a few minutes, we will say it together, when we repeat the Baptismal covenant: “I believe in the communion of saints.”

I don't mean that I believe in the people that the general world, outside the church, calls saints. You know: Saint Francis, Saint Mary, Mother Teresa, Saint so-and-so. They are all wonderful people, yes, and they are all saints; and, yes, I believe very much in them, too.

But I believe in something bigger. I believe in the communion of saints. I believe in the *community* of saints.

I believe that when God touches someone, that person becomes part of a community. And when God touches someone in baptism, as we are about to witness today, that person becomes contagious – from the Latin word meaning “to touch.” When a person is touched by God in baptism, I believe that person becomes contagious. That person becomes a carrier.

Yes, I know. In these days of Ebola paranoia, and obsession with even the slightest of germs and viruses, we all know—or think we know—what being contagious is. It is generally something we are scared of! In our generation, we have been scared of so many touches deemed to be contagious: HIV/AIDS, the flu, Ebola, whatever.

Today, I believe in something far more powerful than those deadly diseases. I believe that the touch of God is contagious. I believe that when God touches us, we become a carrier. We become a carrier of grace. We become a contagious communion!

Maybe that condition does not carry the same strength from carrier to carrier, but we do all carry that condition. The communion of saints is group of people who are carriers of grace. And that grace is so powerful that we can catch it from each other. In fact, that grace is so powerful that we can catch it from people who are alive or dead. We are grace-carriers.

Some of the carriers of God's grace have names that we do not remember. They taught us Sunday School, or they taught our children Sunday School, or they taught our neighbors' children Sunday School. Or they served food at our parish dinners and at the homeless shelters.

And, most of the times, these carriers of grace, this communion of saints, were not even at a physical church at all. They were at their businesses, their places of work. You have met them “in school, or in lanes, or at sea – in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea.” (Hymn 293 in *The Hymnal*, words by Lesbia Scott). They were doing things like making peace, being merciful, being pure in heart – the very things that Jesus calls “blessed” in the Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake. The actual church is not the place where those attributes are caught the most often. They show up where we work and where we engage in relationships: in our families, in our neighborhoods, even in our politics. They show up wherever grace-carriers touch people.

The carriers of grace, the saints, are not always the strong-looking and healthy-looking. Often, they look like those who are sad and in mourning: “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus said. Often, they look like those who are forlorn and depressed: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus said.

I believe in the communion of saints, those people who have shown me some kind of grace even in the strangest of places and conditions, and even when they were unaware they were carrying and transmitting grace.

You’ve had them in your life, too. You knew they had weaknesses and quirks and idiosyncrasies. But they carried something greater than their weaknesses; in fact, they carried grace in the midst of their weaknesses. That’s what made their very weaknesses carriers of the contagion. Grace is contagious, and it is made strong in weakness – just as St. Paul reminded the Corinthians that the power of Christ is made perfect in weakness.

I believe in the grace of God that dwelled in each of the people whose names are listed in our service leaflet this morning, and whom we will remember by name this afternoon at our All Saints Memorial Service. These are the people, known to someone in our community, who have died in the last year. Every one of them is known to someone in this room. Every one of them touched someone with grace. They passed on the contagion to someone else. They carried grace into the world. Maybe it was our mother who died a few months ago, or our father who died last year, or our neighbor or cousin, or my friend’s parent.

I believe in the communion of saints. This communion is how grace gets transmitted from generation to generation.

Today, we baptize new saints, we bless expecting parents. We greet old friends, and we welcome new members into our community. Are we ready to pass on our contagious condition to them? Do we risk touching them and passing on something that is more powerful than us?

In the church, we call this sacred community “communion;” and “communion” is the same word we use when we drink wine from a common cup and eat bread from a common source. Church is where we receive Holy Communion. I believe in “holy communion,” the communion of saintly people, the communion of saints.

In this communion community, we encounter differences of opinion. We argue with each other. We get on each other’s nerves. Just like any other family. But these relationships, even the antagonistic ones, are the very places where we learn something about forgiveness, where we learn something about God’s grace.

Churches are for this communion. Do not come to this church, do not join this church, if you are not ready for communion. Communion with God. Communion with Jesus Christ. Communion with the Holy Spirit. And, most explicitly, Communion with the saints – those people who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are persecuted, and who are reviled. God blesses this community, this communion that you are joining. And, this community you are joining is truly communicable. We transmit things to each other.

Today, I believe in the contagious communion of saints, the communion of God’s Holy Ones. We are young, and we are old. We are conservative, and we are liberal. We are clean, and we are dirty. Some are religious, and some are not. Some are dead, and some are living – just as Lennon and McCartney sang:

*There are places I’ll remember
All my life, though some have changed,
Some forever, not for better,
Some have gone and some remain.
All these places have their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall,
Some are dead, and some are living.
In my life, I’ve loved them all.
(Lennon-McCartney, “In My Life,” 1965)*

I’ve loved them all, because I’ve believed in them. I believe in the communion of saints: all of us who are contagious, with a condition more powerful than any one of us individually – contagious with the grace of God.

The Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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