

Credo: I Believe in God's People

February 13, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Hebrews 11:32-12:2

So today we are in week 5 of our 7-week journey of exploration into our basic, most foundational core beliefs as Christians. And as we explore these core beliefs, we are using as our guide, as our model, the ancient words of the Apostle's Creed. So, just a quick refresher for those of you who haven't been with us lately, or for those of you who have been, but have slept a few times in the last few weeks...the Apostles' Creed is a statement of faith, written sometime in the earliest years of the church. We don't actually know exactly when it was written, or by whom, but we do know that very early on it was being used by the church in baptisms, as a way for the person being baptized into the community of faith to say "here is what I believe."

And now, 2000 years later, we are still using the Apostles' Creed. We still use it today in baptisms. And we still use it (from time to time) in worship, to remind ourselves of the basics of our faith. And even when we are not reciting it in worship, we still teach it in Confirmation classes and in other spaces where it is important for us to learn to articulate what it is that we believe and why.

So the Creed is important. But it does use some really old language. And some of it can be complicated, and confusing. Which is why we are taking about seven weeks or so to go through the creed, bit-by-bit, so that we can flesh it out a little bit and help it make just a little bit more sense for our lives.

So as we started this series, we started with a big, long, three-week dive into the Trinity. I believe in God the Father Almighty. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. And I believe in the Holy Spirit. Then last week we turned to the most confusing line of the creed: I believe in the holy catholic church. Or, more accurately, I believe in the church universal. I believe in a church that is not divided by theological differences or political differences or denominational differences or splits or schisms – but is instead drawn together and strengthened by the differences that are necessary for the body of Christ to function in all of its beauty. And I believe in a God who draws us together, even through the things that divide us.

This week, we are turning to the next line of the Creed, and at the outset, this line seems really similar to last week's. It's almost a continuation of what we have already been talking about: I believe in the communion of saints.

And like last week's line, this one requires just a little bit of extra explanation.

Because just like the word “catholic” last week was maybe a little bit of a roadblock for some of us to get past, the word “saints” this week is another such word. A word that is powerful, and important, but maybe comes with just a little bit of baggage.

So, what in the world is a saint?

Well, it probably won't surprise you to discover that that is yet one more thing in a long list of things upon which people can't quite agree.

Some people believe that saints are people who have died, but during their lives, they demonstrated a number of different characteristics that showed that they were somehow “closer” to God than the average Joe Blow Churchgoer. And so the Catholic church, back in the year 1234, began a process of “canonization” – a process through which the pope officially declares that this person is unquestionably holy and in heaven with God. And therefore, you may pray to this person directly, and they will intercede on your behalf to God.

For somebody to be canonized as a saint, they have to have been dead for at least five years. During their life, they must have lived an extraordinarily, heroically virtuous life. They must have performed miracles during their lifetime. And, they must have been either martyred for their faith, or they must be responsible for miracles performed after their death.

That's a pretty high bar. The most recent person to be canonized was Mother Teresa.

So, that's one understanding of saints. But I'm willing to bet that when you or I use the word “saint” in everyday conversation, that's not what we are talking about. We are generally not talking about people who are officially recognized by the Catholic church. We might say “so-and-so is such a saint,” and by that we generally mean that this person is extra-super kind, or generous, or patient. And lives a really good, well-ordered life. Maybe not perfect – but as close to perfect as we are ever going to see. Someone who I deeply admire and respect, but who I could personally never quite measure up to.

I'm sure we have all had people like this in our lives. A teacher, or a neighbor, or a friend, who will go down in our minds forever as “one of the best people I ever knew.” When I was a kid, I had a nanny who fit this criteria. Her kindness and her patience and her love were unparalleled. She would take all of the preteen angst that I would hurl in her direction and throw back nothing but love and care in return. No matter how many times I would try to get her fired, she would again and again come back with a calm, steady, steadfast presence. This woman was indeed a saint. And I love her for it.

But our scripture reading today challenges even that picture of a saint, just a little bit. And when we recite the words of the Apostles' Creed, I don't get the feeling that the creed is talking just about people who are like Mary Poppins: “practically perfect in every way.” So, let's get down to the root of the word “saint.”

The English word saint is derived from the Latin word *sanctus*, meaning, "holy." It is closely related to the word "sacred," same Latin root, meaning "made holy by association with the divine."

In scripture, this word "holy" – translated from the Hebrew word "*kadosh*", or the Greek word "*hagios*" is sometimes used in relation to God – for example, at the beginning of the book of Isaiah, when Isaiah has a vision of God, the winged seraphs are worshipping God, saying "*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.*" Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." And in the New Testament we have the "*hagios pneumatos*," or Holy Spirit.

But, throughout scripture, especially in the New Testament, this word "*hagios*" is sometimes translated not as "holy" but as "saint." And in these instances, it is referring not specifically to God, but to a human being or human beings who have been "made holy by association with the divine." In essence, made holy by God.

And what does that look like? Well, let's turn to our scripture from Hebrews today.

Today's scripture starts right smack in the middle of a longer passage, when the writer is writing about people – saints, if you will – whose mark on the world was that they lived by faith. If we were to back up all the way back to verse 4 of chapter 11, we would see that the writer starts at the very beginning, listing Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, who got murdered by his brother because his brother was jealous of him. Then we get to the stories of other really big names in scripture. Noah. Abraham. Isaac. Jacob. Moses. "The greats," if you will.

Then right before our passage today starts, the writer adds Rahab to this list. That's interesting. Because Rahab was far from a perfect person. She was a woman – who in that day and time didn't have much standing in society. She was a Canaanite – one of a group of people who Israel hated. And she was a prostitute. Whether by choice or by force, she was somebody who was seen as "tainted." A "moral failure." And yet, despite her "outsider" status, she provided shelter and protection to the Israelite spies and so was woven into this list.

And then the list goes on. Gideon. A faithful man of God who led the Israelite armies to victory...but only after he called God's power into question no less than three times. In fact, his story is less about how faithful he was, and more about how faithful God was, in spite of him.

Barak. Another military hero who did great things...but because he hemmed and hawed when God called him, the credit for Israel's victory would not go to him.

Samson. Super-strong guy who was absolutely used by God to do great things. But oi. He was downright stupid when it came to seeing through his wife's shenanigans. He was blinded by her beauty and was willing to sell Israel out as a result.

Jephthah. I don't even know what Jephthah is doing on this list. If you want to read that story, it is in Judges 12. Let's just say that I have zero nice things to say about him. If I were compiling a list of saints, Jephthah would absolutely not make the cut.

David. Great king. Strong ruler. Totally flawed human being.

Samuel. This one I can get on board with. There's a reason I named my son after him.

And then the writer moves into other people who he does not name. The prophets. All of them. Women who have been forced to bury their children. Unnamed heroes who died a martyr's death. People who were tortured and killed. People who wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. People whose names we may never know. Women and men; Jews and Gentiles; adults and children; weak and powerful; people all throughout history who are to be commended for their faith.

And when we look at this list of saints, what is the common thread? None of these men or women were perfect. Not a single one of them. They all had faults. They all had moments of failure. Some of them were absolutely horrible human beings (*cough*cough*Jephthah).

But it was not their faults that defined them. It was not their failures that earned them a place on this list. And it is not their triumphs that makes them saints. Their good deeds; their military might; their kindness or patience or love – those things themselves (if they are present at all) are not what makes a person holy.

What makes a person a saint is not their intrinsic "holiness," but their proximity to the one who alone is holy.

Let me say that another way. You and I are not saints because we are perfect. Far from it. You and I are saints because we are in relationship with a God who is perfect. And part of being in relationship with God means that the Holy Spirit – God within us – is constantly working to re-form us into the image and likeness of God every single day.

That doesn't mean we always act like it. Goodness knows, some of the people on this list sure as heck didn't act like it. But it does mean that through the power and the love of the Holy Spirit, we are on a lifelong journey toward holiness. And *that* is what makes a saint.

I believe in the Communion of Saints.

I believe that you and I are part of a long history of God's people that goes back thousands and thousands and thousands of years. People who lived lives of deep faithfulness, and people who lived lives of deep fallenness. And sometimes, people who

lived both lives in the same instant. People who worshipped and served God, and in some instances even gave their very lives in service to God, and people whose egos sometimes got in the way, and whose passions were mis-directed, and whose fears drove wedges between themselves and other people and God.

And as the writer of Hebrews so vividly describes for us, every one of these people – these faithful, broken, flawed, loved, saintly, holy people, from the Abrahams and the Samuels to the Jephthahs and the nameless – every one of them is joined together, linked together by the God who draws us together. And together, they surround *us*, and cheer *us* on, as we live our messy, complicated, blessed, challenging, beautiful lives today. As God draws us closer and closer to himself – as the Spirit of God goes about the lifelong work of making us into something holy and beautiful, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. A multitude of saints who have walked this journey before us and whose lives stand as a testament to the grace and the love and the mercy and the power of God.

So my friends, my fellow saints, holy people-in-the-making. Beautiful people. Beloved people. Faithful people. Messy people. May we all join arms together as part of this enormous cloud of witnesses; as part of this communion of saints, that we might accompany one another through life and companion one another into the loving arms of our holy God.