

The communion of saints provide a glimpse of God's "always and already" presence in the midst of our "not yet" world. God's kingdom breaks into the "not yet" world through our communion with all the company of heaven. Today, the feast of All Saints, is a major feast day for the Episcopal Church, intended to be celebrated at the levels of Pentecost, Palm Sunday, Easter and Christmas. But there's a certain hesitation, isn't there? There's an uncertainty and I wonder if it isn't because of the way we think about what a saint is. Surely, a saint is a person who is single-heartedly dedicated to holiness—a godly person known for their piety or virtue, or the purity of their conscience. Well, yes...and maybe no.

Let me mention a few of the folks we consider official saints: There's St. Scholastica, who called up a rainstorm just to trap her brother into continuing a conversation she wanted to have. Or St. Francis, who left the order that he founded over a disagreement. St. Fiacre, who was notoriously rude to women, and Sts. Tertullian, Clement and John Chrysostom who all (mostly out of their own fear) wrote hateful things about women. For 37 years, St. Simeon lived on a 15-foot-tall pole that he had climbed to avoid people who wanted his help. St. Seraphim hid in a hole from people who came to him for healing. Mother Theresa often told people who wanted to learn from her to leave her alone. St. Fintan cursed an Irish King, who died five days later. And St. Paul held a long-running feud with St. James and St. Peter.

In short, the communion saints includes some people who are both awesomely holy and also genuinely, sometimes deeply, flawed. People, that is, like you and me. That's because the path of sainthood is not about perfection, at least not the way we think about it. The path of sainthood is about perseverance.

Matthew's Jesus in our Gospel this morning isn't preaching about how to become perfect, but showing us why we persevere. Jesus is speaking to a Jewish Christian community on a mountain that surely reminds them of where and how Moses spoke to YHWH to bring God's instruction to the people. Jesus does not replace that instruction, but interprets and fulfills it. Jesus is not saying "if you do this, then this will be your reward," as though giving advice for how to live. Jesus is *blessing* the community and us, and is *himself* the blessing that abides with us.

The Hebrew word translated in this reading as "blessing" is "ashar," which literally means "to find the right road." If we are expecting this passage to be a

lesson on how to earn God's grace, the teaching should sound strange. "You are on the right road if you are poor in spirit." If we are perfecting ourselves, wouldn't the goal be to make ourselves rich in spirit? "You are on the right road if you are meek." Almost every self-esteem building guru in this country will tell you that the path to achieving perfection is in overcoming meekness in ourselves.

In fact, it's difficult to make sense of most of this list if we imagine that the path of sainthood is about perfecting ourselves and our world through our own efforts. Because the path of sainthood is about perseverance. The sense of these blessings begins to unfold when we see that Jesus is describing is how God is, not what you and I should do to gain God's favor. Jesus Christ is the blessing that he is describing. Jesus Christ *himself* is a trustworthy description of the character of God that is only secondarily about the character of Christians. We act in ways that participate in God's work of perfection, not because it earns us anything, but because God's perfect grace is at work in and through us.

God's perfect grace is within us and among us here in this particular manifestation of the Body of Christ. Consequently, the more we empty ourselves, that is to say, the poorer in spirit we become, the more we experience our total dependence on God; the more aware we become that there is only God. Do you mourn? To mourn in first century Palestine meant not to grieve, but to protest against injustice. And so those who mourn are strengthened in the community of saints by others, including Christ, who also protest injustice. We are humble—a better translation of the Hebrew, not "meek" as in "timid"—we are humble because Jesus was humble and gentle in his recognition of the gift of creation. Through Christ's awareness, we have inherited the entire world and our awe humbles us.

God desires righteousness—and by that I mean right relationship. God created us to be in right relationship and the more we bring ourselves into right relationship with God, each other and creation, the fuller we become. The world is not a merciful place, but you can always see mercy. Give it to someone else. God is merciful and so when you give mercy, God's mercy passes through you...you receive it so that you can pass it on. Because God is pure heart, our hearts see more of God as God purifies them. Because God is the maker of a peace beyond all understanding, we participate in God's peacemaking as long as we put God at the center, whether we are pacifists or peace-makers who put their lives in danger. *All* are children of God, and when people choose to remain in right relationship with God regardless of what the world says or does to them, the communion of saints and all the company of heaven is with them.

The communion of saints, according to our catechism, is “the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.” Simply living with other people does not create community, not even when we enjoy each other’s company. We are bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

The communion of saints allows us to be about something greater than ourselves. When we *transcend* ourselves for each other without *extinguishing* ourselves, this community—the parish of St. Elizabeth—becomes a sacrament of human fulfillment and purpose. The power of the Spirit makes us one with a bonding power stronger than any divisive forces at work in our midst.

Trappist Fr. Charles Cummings wrote that “Living in the real, not the ideal, community and taking an active part in its life calls for a generous measure of self-forgetfulness and self-discipline. The astounding fact...is that in spite of our evident brokenness and in spite of our evident personal diversity, we can live together for a lifetime with a oneness and harmony that transcend all possible expectations.¹”

The Kingdom of heaven is truly at hand right here, right now and also still to come. We experience it when we give it to others. As we release our attachment to worldly attainments, God’s heaven is increasingly present and we dwell in at least a foretaste of it. God is constantly coaxing us as into a fuller and deeper relationship with God’s self. That is the path of sainthood. It doesn’t mean that we will be better than other people. Finding the right road doesn’t mean that we will have more perfect lives than other people. Finding the right road simply means that we will be in right relationship with the God who created us. It means that sitting right here, we are surrounded by other flawed and beautiful, broken and healed, doing-their-best-to-persevere saints—sitting here together like a gorgeous mosaic made up of cracked tiles of every color and shape.

This is the taste of the already present grace-filled life in Christ that begins with our baptism, that grows over our lives as faithful servants and that Scripture promises will be fully consummated in heaven. And that is why we celebrate the feast of All Saints with all the joy of Pentecost, Christmas and Easter.

¹ Cummings, Charles, OCSO. *Monastic Practices*. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1986