

Holy Catholic Church & the Communion of Saints
Creed Series Week 6
6/21/15

Welcome/intro:

“Connecting people to God and to each other”—hope you experience a little bit of both of those things while you’re here.

HAPPY FATHER’S DAY! From one dad to all of you who are dads, whether little or grown, I pray we’ll grow to be father’s who reflect the true Father

This morning we’re closing out our series going through the oldest Christian Creed, the Apostle’s Creed

And next week, as we move to one service at what time? 10:00!

We’ll do our celebration Sunday where we’ll celebrate how God’s worked in our midst over this past year

And then afterwards, like Chris said, we’ll do our big volunteer appreciation lunch we want to invite EVERYONE to stay here for that to join us in celebrating and thanking our volunteers whether you’ve volunteered anywhere this past year or not!

We’re closing out our series in the Apostle’s Creed with these last four lines, and as has been true throughout this series we could spend a couple weeks on each one of them

I believe in...

***the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.***

So in order to focus us a bit as we wrap up this series today, I’m going to pare this down a bit

We just did a 6-week series on forgiveness, some of you are still carrying the scars around from that series, so if you missed that you should go back and check that out

So we’ll check that box for now, there’s plenty more to be said about forgiveness but we’ll come back to that later

These last two are super-critical and there are fewer places where I think we’re more confused as Christians than when we talk about God’s ultimate plan for us as his people

So because this is so important and it requires a little more work than we can do in one sitting, I'm going to handle these two lines in a good American way

I'm going to outsource it. On the book table is a book that we plugged several months ago and I bought a few more copies for you this week
it's called "Surprised by Hope" by one of my favorite authors named N.T. Wright

And what he's doing in this book is taking these lines in the creed and saying
"what does it mean that our bodies will actually get resurrected just like Jesus' body was resurrected
and what does it mean that there's this incredible, infinite promise of life everlasting spelled out in the Scriptures

AND, very importantly, how does that re-frame and help us to re-think what life here on earth in the here and now is all about?

So I'm going to let Dr. Wright take these last two lines in the Creed and invite you to pick up a copy of the book "Surprised by Hope" for sale at the book table at a discount

And while you're there, we've bought some new summer fiction reading and other new books just this week for you to check out, so stop by the book table and pick up a book

So we've checked off a couple of these boxes, and that leaves us with these top two lines which in many ways go together and is where we'll camp out here today

***I believe in...the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints***

We talked a couple of weeks ago about how the word "catholic" is a lower-case "c" and the word simply means "universal"
it's not referring to "THE" Catholic church with nuns and priests

This creed was written before there even WAS a capital-C "Catholic" church!

But it's referring to the church all over the world, everywhere, the universal church that follows and declares the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus

And in the communion of the saints, we're sharing in the life of Christ together as a family of God
we're participating in this great, huge community of people that have been worshipping Jesus for 2,000 years now and will continue to worship Jesus long after we're gone

Saints doesn't just mean extra spiritual or holy people, but ALL the people who have called on the name of Jesus together over the centuries.

So as we close this series, we're going to talk about our connection with this messy and beautiful group of people throughout history called the church

Which in many ways is the perfect way for us to close out because one of the gifts of this Creed is it helps us to find our place and our identity in with a larger story, a larger purpose, a larger meaning
and a larger community of people who for 2000 years have recited this creed

In a week where people in Charleston who would heartily agree with and recite this creed are in mourning after the horrific events of this week
what difference does the communion of saints make?

What does that mean for us globally and what does it mean for us here locally at Chatham Community Church? That's where we're going this morning.

About ten months ago, we moved our church offices from up in Cole Park Plaza down to Chatham Mills in Pittsboro
because we were told that sometime in the fall they would be knocking down our building and doing big huge renovations in Cole Park Plaza

And we waited and watched to see what would become of Cole Park Plaza...and what happened was nothing all school year long until Monday this past week

Here is the footage of our old smelly office space being knocked over—sending thousands of cockroaches scurrying across all of Chatham County
captured on my Iphone by my son as we happened to be driving by and seeing the happy destruction

In the Old Testament, there were a couple of different markers and signs of what it meant to be a part of God's people

And the physical temple was one of the big ones.

The Israelites were connected with God as his people because God's presence lived in that building right over there—that was the holy place

But when the New Testament writers who are almost all certainly good Jews talk about the markers of what it means to be a part of God's people AFTER Jesus

They never, ever, ever talk about a building. Because they know that this is what eventually will happen to every single building.

In fact, the Romans get so fed up with the Jewish people that in 70 A.D. shortly after Jesus' ascension, they come through and STEAMROLL their temple
totally crushed the people of Israel because so essential to their identity

But one of the things that Jesus has done in his life, death, and resurrection, is re-drawn and re-configured the place where God lives AWAY from a physical and external building

And has instead said that the Holy Spirit that we talked about last week will reside and take up residence inside each one of us

Because buildings get knocked down eventually—eventually all buildings crumble or get knocked down
but people are eternal, we've been made to live forever and we will live forever

And so we get in the book of Hebrews this great re-drawing of what it means to be a part of God's people in community

And in Hebrews 11, the writer of Hebrews says what unites us all is not a shared building but a common faith

And what he does is he rattles off this huge litany of people who all lived by faith and who followed God by faith
and where he's going to land with this is that if we're living by faith, we're a part of this great communion of saints

We're going to read excerpts of this list of hall of fame people that the writer of Hebrews is going to just blitz through

And even if you're not familiar with the Bible, chances are there will be at least one or two names you'll recognize

Let's watch as the author of Hebrews re-draws the community of God's people AWAY from a building and AROUND a life of faith

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings...

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family...

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going....

11 And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she^[b] considered him faithful who had made the promise...

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. ..

23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ...

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.^[d]

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

This past week our small group closed up shop for the summer and as we wrapped up I was reflecting on what a crazy mix of people we have in our group

We've got what I'm almost sure is the biggest age-differential in our small group with one person who's 19
and another couple who I shall generously describe as somewhere around 70!

We've got someone who's a dancer and owns her own studio and someone else who's a physicist

We've got school teachers and techies and a nurse and an insurance salesman, someone who works at a dry-cleaners
and a couple of chefs and a former real estate office manager turned life coach, a full-time mom

We've got people who have just come to faith in the past year or two
others who have been Christians their whole lives, and still others who have fairly recently re-discovered and re-engaged with their faith
and plenty of us wrestle with big questions and sometimes wrestle with cynicism or doubt

And what we did to close out the year together was we went around and put each person in the spotlight for just a couple minutes while a couple of people shared how that person had encouraged and blessed them-- It was awesome.

And funny thing happened as we went around the room and celebrated each person—all that diversity of age and personality, that didn't go away.

We could celebrate how God had blessed us with the quiet wisdom of one person in one moment and then celebrate the humor and out-going-ness of someone else a minute later

See, over the course of our year together, God has forged together a great community of people who have ONLY ONE BIG THING in common that brings us together

And that is wrestling with, experiencing, expressing authentic and genuine faith in Jesus

And through that common bond, we've experienced a rich, sweet, authentic and life-giving community

This crazy diverse, mixed group of people that is our small group is a small microcosm of what the author of Hebrews is describing as he unleashes this dramatic recitation of these Old Testament very imperfect heroes of the faith

In this list of people who have walked by faith and who have been a part of this communion of saints

There are farmers and carpenters and hunters and princes and slaves and prostitutes

There are kings and shepherds and sometimes they're the same person! there are prophets and priests, there warriors and prime ministers

There are introverts and extroverts, there are people with good social skills and people that you wouldn't have wanted to invite over to your house for a party

There are young and there are old, there are basically fearful people and people who have this natural gift of courage, men and women

My friends, do you know who belongs and who "fits in" with the people of God, the communion of saints, God's church? Everybody.

My friends, do you know what kind of person would make for a great Christian? Everyone.

My friends, do you know what kind of person God delights to bless and use and invite into his crazy purposes of changing the entire world?

ANY and EVERY kind of person who's willing to walk by faith

Whether you are a man or woman, young or old, no matter your temperament or interests or social skills or job skills

Do this for me: picture the least spiritual, the most spiritually resistant or grumpy person you know—got 'em?

The truest more REALLY THEM thing that they could do would be to be here with you: worshipping, praying, opening the Scriptures—can you picture it? Can you believe it enough to pray it for them?

There is ONE place where all of us are invited in to participate and be a part of this ONE GREAT BIG REDEMPITIVE and LIFE-GIVING story and that is the family of faith and the people of God

And this is the one place where we can bring our quirks and our uniqueness and where we can find our place into a larger story that doesn't destroy our uniqueness

But instead redeems it, blesses it, makes our uniqueness an integral part of how God goes to work and involves us in his work and his plan.

Life in God's kingdom and life among God's people is this wide-open, creative, generative space that sparks more and greater innovation and beauty and hope than any other place on this earth

C.S. Lewis says it this way:

"There are no real personalities apart from God. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most 'natural' men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been; how gloriously different are the saints."

How monotonously alike are all the great tyrants and conquerors—all the same! Living for glory and ambition and exploiting and using people—some old story line! Nothing super creative or unusual about them!

BUT how gloriously different are the saints!

All life apart from God is monotonously alike! There are about 3 story-lines: living for themselves, living to try to make other people happy, or living for stuff or money

Those are pretty predictable story-lines those stories pretty much all fit into a couple of predictable boxes

Oh but when we give ourselves over to God and connect your story in with HIS huge, vast, creative story, there's no telling what happens

And we have all these great pictures of men and women who are all radically different and who's lives go in completely unexpected and crazy directions as they walk this walk of faith

Not just in the Bible

We've got the Mother Teresa's and the Martin Luther King Jr's and William Wilberforce who abolished the slave trade in Christ's name, dedicating his whole life as a politician and finally seeing the bill pass when he was on his death bed

And we've got millions and millions of smaller stories throughout history of Christians building hospitals and orphanages and schools
and digging wells to get people fresh drinking water
Stuff they never imagined they would ever do!!

This is what happens when we give ourselves over to God and discover our real personality—the glorious diversity in the communion of the Saints!

And after the author of Hebrews has finished his rapid-fire summary of all these people in the Biblical story, he makes application for us and calls us to step in with all these people

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Last week I heard a story of a Christian couple who flew to China to adopt a girl several years ago who had a cleft palate
of course, kids with medical issues are always harder to adopt out but this couple was thrilled to do so

And they went to China and they got this great little girl from an orphanage in China

And one day they were all in a little market—mom, dad, and their new little girl, and the shop-keeper said to them: "Oh, you must be Christians!"

And they said, "well, yes, how did you know?"

And the shopkeeper said, "The Christians always take the broken ones."

The Christians always take the broken ones.

Let's put aside the heartbreaking description of a girl made in God's image as a broken one—we are ALL broken ones and we are all healed in Christ!

And let's turn our attention to the great cloud of witnesses in that story

See, as the Christian couple was flying out to China to adopt a girl with a cleft palate, they were doing so in the company of a great cloud of witnesses who had gone before them to do the exact same thing

They maybe didn't know them, maybe weren't aware of it, but there was this huge crowd of people who had gone before them!

And the Chinese man who owned that market, he had experienced many times over this same great cloud of witnesses

This great cloud of witnesses who bore witness to the fact that loving Jesus meant loving the orphan

and particularly loving the orphan with special needs who had a much lower chance of ever being adopted out of that system

The writer of Hebrews says that GIVEN that we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses

all these heroes of the faith, living and dead, who are cheering us on and inviting us into this wide open, huge, glorious, un-predictable story of God

We need to act in such a way that is in keeping with the arc of this story that we've thrown our lot in with

we are to run this Jesus-style race in our context, in our gifts, given our situation and abilities and passions and interests

Which means, the writer says, that some things we're trying to carry with us just might have to go! They'd just hinder us and entangle us!

There are better and worse ways to run the race Jesus has set out before us

there are some signature strengths and some signature weaknesses in how we have run this race as a church for the past 2,000 years

The church/communion of saints is at its best when:

-We fix our eyes on Jesus and we engage the Scriptures faithfully

There's a lot of discussion about the decline of Christianity in America, but if you look more closely at the numbers and which parts of the church are dying out

The churches that are dying out are the ones about 100 years ago that have said that Jesus was a nice guy and the Bible has some nice stories but we're all a lot smarter now

We know that miracles don't really happen now, for example and we need to not take Jesus or the Scriptures quite so seriously and just teach people to be nice and good and loving—basic morality lessons

So a funny thing happens to Christianity if you take Jesus and the Scriptures a little less seriously

It's not really Christianity any more, it's something else!

And so these churches that thought they were being so sophisticated and many of whom thought nobody was going to believe in miracles in the 20th and 21st century so the only way they could survive was by jettisoning stuff like believing in miracles or the resurrection

It turns out, that was a mistake on many, many levels.

And not only are they dying out now, but they've led millions of people into a system of beliefs that they called Christianity but was really a completely distorted and watered-down version of the real thing

We as a church around the world are at our best when we remember that we're Jesus' church, and we are fully submitted and following and fixing our eyes on him and attending and wrestling with and taking seriously his Scriptures

The church and the communion of saints is at its best when

-We're operating in mutually inter-dependent, reconciling community

The communion of the saints has always been a community of the saints and has always included people who are not-yet saints

And reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, blessing, relying on one another, challenging and correcting one another has always been the plan

In our small group this past week as we wrapped up one person shared that they had been in a spiritually very, very dark season for at least two years

And perhaps NOT coincidentally, they had been mostly out of Christian community for the bulk of that time

And they said that over the course of this year the darkness had started to turn into light, and this small group was the instrument God had used to breathe light and life back into his soul

From the moment that Jesus called his first disciples to the hundreds of millions of people gathering in his name this morning all over the world

The great cloud of witnesses has always been in community, and the call to follow Jesus always means being a part of this greater, interdependent community

And this applies to us here this morning AND it applies to how we process and think about what happened this week in Charleston

As Christians, we are called and love and serve our neighbor, no matter what they do or don't believe

But when the Scriptures describe our connection with our brothers and sisters in Charleston as Christians as being all a part of one body

that means that when one part of the body gets injured, we all suffer with it, we all feel it, we all enter in and come alongside in mourning and grief and humility and love

I have people in my family who do not know Jesus—the Scriptures say that because of our shared connection in Christ in the communion of Saints

I am MORE connected with the men and women who died this past week in that prayer meeting

than I am with those who look a lot more like me in my family who do not know Jesus

And what that means is as we share in the great cloud of witnesses together, their pain is my pain.

Because we share in Christ together

I want to listen extra carefully when they describe this as not just an isolated incident but a part of a bigger problem of race in our country

Because we share in Christ together

I want to be especially open to how the Spirit might be at work in this situation to help me personally become more attentive to issues that matter to my brothers and sisters in Christ

To deal with my own prejudice and latent racism that I wish wasn't in my heart but wishful thinking isn't the same thing as the real repentance that the Scriptures call us to

And I'm praying that the Spirit of God that we asked for all this past week

might be using this incident to help our church, our county, and our nation to deal with issues of race in ways that might change the conversation and help us to listen and to grow as a people

The communion of saints has been at its best when

-We live out and integrate our faith in real-time, real-life situations in our broken world

-Living and articulating reconciliation and forgiveness

We've already heard family members in Charleston talking about giving the gift of forgiveness to this man who ruined their lives and destroyed their loved ones
have you heard those folks? Incredible, isn't it?

Jesus people aren't the only ones who can forgive other people, thank goodness
but Jesus people are at our best when we're taking the good news of the forgiveness of Christ and working it out in our lives and situations

-We're serving/caring for 'the broken ones'/laying our lives down for others in Jesus' name

One of my favorite speakers talks about how the church needs to run "TOWARD" the mess, not away from the mess—moving towards with a heart that is willing to serve the other, just like Jesus did

Finally, the communion of saints has been its best when

-We're speaking the truth in love to one another and our larger culture

There's this Biblical tradition of the prophetic voice—and the prophetic voice doesn't mean being able to tell the future, that's not how the Bible uses it

The prophet was the one who speaks the truth—they simply spoke the truth about God and about the people and named the gaps

When William Wilberforce declared slavery to be an evil that must be done away with in the British colonies

he was speaking as a Jesus-loving prophet to people who didn't want to hear it and who weren't willing to change—at least not right way

Martin Luther King Jr, the same thing

Being willing to speak the truth in love, even when it's not going to win you or the church any popularity contests is part of what it means to be in the communion of saints

And it's the mark of some of our greatest moments in our history

Now, the communion of saints also has some signature sins and times when we've been **at our worst**, I'd summarize those this way:

-Running this race in the way of the world rather than in the Jesus way

Mostly, you can categorize all the biggest blunders of the church in 3 categories: money, sex, and power

When we stop fixing our eyes on Jesus and stop learning from him and from his Scriptures, we start trying to run his church in a way that is not congruent with his character

And the results are always predictably disastrous

Another signature sin of the communion of saints:

-Sins of community: co-dependence or independence

Co-dependence or enmeshment is simply what happens when you let someone else live your life for you—whether that be emotionally or relationally or intellectually

That happens sometimes in marriages and sometimes in families and sometimes in friendships and sometimes in churches

Co-dependence and enmeshment is not the Biblical value—interdependence is.

But on the other end of the spectrum, we get independence, aka, Chatham County!

Many of us moved out to Chatham County to have 5-15 acres and no neighbors and to be left alone

There is a fierce independent streak in Chatham County and because we're a church in Chatham County, this is one of our biggest obstacles to becoming the church that Jesus would have us to be

Because independence is not a biblical value. Inter-dependence is.

And figuring out what that looks like given our make-up and temperaments and personalities and how spread out we all are
is one of the biggest challenges we have as a church

And it's one of the reasons why we talk about small groups so much around here.

Finally, one of the signature sins of the communion of the saints throughout our history is

-Equal and opposite errors: zero convictions and condemning self-righteousness

Both of these errors show us that we don't really understand the fullness of the gospel and what it really means to follow Jesus

Our culture says that whatever anyone wants to believe is okay. We're encouraged from day one to be somewhat soft and marshmallow-y about our faith

And without firm convictions, especially those of us who are people pleasers, we'll just sort of roll with that.

Sure, you believe in whatever you want to believe in, I'll believe in Jesus, let's all just be marshmallows together

The problem with that was that Jesus wasn't a marshmallow himself and he didn't teach his followers to be marshmallows.

But on the other hand, Christian history is full of folks who were so smug and arrogant in how they wielded what they called truth
that there was nothing loving or kind or generous in how they related to people

They simply condemned and beat people up with it.

If you find yourself falling into either of these two errors, I want to give you a summer homework assignment: just read Jesus through the lens of this issue
How does Jesus speak the truth in love? How does he hold to firm convictions without a smug and arrogant self-righteousness?

My friends, welcome to the great cloud of witnesses! The communion of saints, the holy catholic church!

It's messy, it's big, it's beautiful, it's full of imperfect people with a perfectly powerful savior who can redeem all of it and who invites us to step into this race with this great cloud of witnesses cheering you on!

My take-home question for you this morning is simply "Have you found your place in the great cloud and the communion of saints yet?"

If you're not a Jesus-follower yet, we're so glad you're here! Nobody here started out a Jesus-follower

All of us entered in at some point, many of us because of the testimony of the great cloud of witnesses—the lives and writings and testimony of other people, some of them dead, some living

And then from there we fixed our eyes on Jesus and found him to be faithful.

And in the process we found our place in the communion of saints and found that to walk with Jesus in community is one of the most life-giving things we could possibly do

You are welcome here as we as a church body participate in this great, 2,000 year long communion of the saints

And if you ARE a Jesus follower, I want to invite you to consider the same question: have you found your place to come alive and to serve in this communion of saints?

Do you have some idea what your gifts are, what God's put you here on earth to do and how that might be worked out in community?

Does anyone really know you and really know what's going on, or are you cut-off and isolated, trying to slog it out alone?

Last week we were talking about the Holy Spirit and we talked about when the Spirit shows up that part of the trick is to lean INTO the Spirit, not AWAY FROM the Spirit

This summer, I want to invite all of us to lean into the communion of saints, to lean INTO community and finding our place in the great cloud of witnesses.

And as we do so, we find that Jesus who made us for this community, makes us more alive, more truly the person he intended us to be when he made us-

AND we're more LIFE-GIVING as we find our place to serve and make a difference in his name.

PRAY

Offering/one minute pause/text prayer request or guest information to phone number on screen