

LIVING IN THE COMMUNE OF SAINTS: Ephesians 4:1-14, Hebrews 12:1-2, 18-22

Portions adapted from "The Communion Of Saints" by Anne Robertson @ Sermon Central.Com

So this year, what is the hottest gift you can get for that person who has everything? How about a glimpse into their family history, their ethnic heritage, and perhaps even their medical future – all determined by a simple cheek swab sent in to one of the now 7 DNA testing companies all vying, for around a \$70.00 fee, to tell you more about yourself than you might care to know.

Finding out about one's connections to previous family or cultural heritage can be fun and informative, but it should come with one caution: if you look far enough down your family tree, you may find someone hanging from it.

Thankfully I don't have to look very hard – and so far have found no one hanging there, because one distant relative has published the "Salley Book" connecting me back 11 generations to **Hans Sali**, born somewhere in the German Canons of Switzerland in 1622.

It's too bad that the trail ends there. I would have liked to have traced my heritage all the way back to **Genghis Kahn** whose own grandson Batu Khan was leading the Mongol Horde in ransacking that part of my ancestral woods back in 1260. So there is a strong probability that I am direct descendant Genghis himself since raping and pillaging was one of their standard



pastimes. This perhaps explains my brown hair, brown eyes, and perhaps even something about my personality (I do bear a spooky resemblance to Genghis). But my blood line connection to Hans Sali has been diluted 11 times – and if to Ghengis Kahn more than 25 times so I really shouldn't blame either of them for who I am.

Anyway, Han's great grandson Henry Salley settled in Orangeburg County SC around 1735. And the most notable records I have found about his descendants were that some were plantation owners, one was a Confederate Colonel, and they all had a preference for naming their son's John or Henry. Also that very few Salleys ever entered the pastorate – which makes me somewhat unique.

On my mother's side, my great, great grandfather and great uncle, two McNeely Brothers, were both Union soldiers (but most likely these two branches of my family tree never met on a field of battle or I wouldn't be here now).

Yes, I am interested in my heritage, as I know several of you are. But what makes me feel more connected to all those who have gone before me is a reflection on what we mean when we talk about the **COMMUNION OF SAINTS**.

Because the connection referred to by "the communion of saints" is just as real and far more current and far stronger – than any genealogical connection to our forebears.

Now, this line from the Apostle's Creed, *I believe in the communion of saints*, may be somewhat confusing to many people. Because we tend to think of "**saints**" as those people declared especially worthy of honor and reverence by the Roman Catholic Church: St. Christopher, St. Patrick, St. Theresa. And we tend to think of **Communion** only as our physical celebration of the Lord's Supper; sharing the bread and cup, which we will do again today. But the notion of the **Communion of Saints** is a much bigger idea.

First, the word "**saint**" as it is used in the Apostles Creed and the Bible simply you and me; all Christians, all believers. Everyone who has been born again into God's family, who has thus been "**set apart**" and "**sanctified**" by the Holy Spirit. Chances are the Roman Catholic Church is not going to be canonizing any of us "saints" according to its criteria, but in God's eyes, all of us who have professed faith in Jesus Christ can freely be referred to as saints.

And yes, while **Communion** is a term often used when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, it also means a lot more than that. In fact, the whole reason we call the celebration of the Lord's Supper a "communion" service is because of **who** we believe we are sharing this moment at the table with.

We believe that when we come to the communion table, through the Holy Spirit we are spiritually connecting ourselves and sharing our life directly with God, and with one another in this Church, and also with all Christians who have ever lived down through time.

We share bread from the same loaf and drink from the same cup...we take the same food that everybody else takes and we take it from the same source to emphasize that we are all children of the same God and are all nourished by the same Holy Spirit.

So when we say, in the Creed, that we *believe in the communion of saints*, we are affirming that what we do at the Lord's table is an illustration of our connection back to God, and the entire Christian family through the person of our savior and Lord, Jesus the Christ.

But the **communion Saints** points towards an even bigger reality than that.

The word **communion** is from Latin meaning "*that which we build or make together as a group.*" We get our words "community" and the more intimate "commune" from this same word. When we live together we are a commune and when we are working and building together we are a community having communion.

Of course the opposite of communion is no union – meaning that which, or those who, work against community – not surprisingly from which we get the word **ammunition**. To work together is to be in communion to work alone is to be ammunition – makes you think.

But if you are a Christian – you don't really have the choice to live in or out of communion. The reality of our spiritual life is based on our common union in Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out ...

*Unity with our Christian brothers and sisters
is not an ideal for which we strive
but a reality in which we participate.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Realize that once you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, an invisible but very real connection links you directly with both God the Father and God the Son – forever.

So “communion” is more than just a legal designation, its more than a blood line, it is the spiritual equivalent of the internet – we are all wired together and powered up – running at the highest speed and never down; having direct communication with God and God with us through the live connection of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Jesus’ prayer asking God to send his Holy Spirit into the disciples and into our lives – and listen especially for “the why”...

As you, Father, are in me
and I am in you,
may they also be in us ...
I in them and you in me,
**that they may become
completely one.**

John 17:20-23

*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. **As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us**, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, **I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)*

Spooky isn't it when you think of it.

We are intimately connected back to the Father,

by the work of the Son, through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

We are living in communion with God.

We are part of God's family – sharing the same spiritual DNA

Which is what we symbolically declare every time we come to this table to eat and drink.

And since all of us have a direct connection back to our original ancestor ... this means we're all related. Like those on my family tree that I can trace back to a common ancestor, We all can trace ourselves back just one generation to God the Father through Jesus Christ! The blood of Ghengis Kahn has been diluted over a nine hundred years before getting to me. But the spirit of Jesus flows through my body as if – because we are – brothers.

That's our first reality expressed by this idea of communion: that we are intimately connected back to God, by Jesus, through the indwelling Holy Spirit – but that's not all who we are connected to. **We are also connected to each other.** Jesus prayer was not only that God would be in us and we in God but that e as the church, as members of one family – we would have the same unity with each other that we have with God our Father – that we also would "***become completely one.***"

As believers in Jesus Christ, the connecting work of the Holy Spirit that puts us in communion with God – also puts us in communion with each other. We may be very different, we may disagree on lots of things, we may not even like each other. Too bad. We are in communion. We are family. As the saying goes, *family is family, you can't choose your family.*

Through the indwelling Holy Spirit we are more closely related to one another and having an actual impact on each other's lives, more than any mere ancestral genealogy, maybe even more than a close family. If we are part of the communion of saints, then we belong to one another and we are expected – by God – to care for one another, be supporting of and supported by one another, and be responsible to one another.

WE have in fact been gifted by the Holy Spirit specifically to actively assist and be a necessary part of each other's life. As a Christian, I am incomplete without you, and you are incomplete without me, and the person beside you. This same Spirit connecting us to God – has also connected us together into something more than just a family.

Listen again to Paul's explanation of what makes us more than family.

***There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the
one hope of your calling, one Lord,
one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.***
Ephesians 4:4-6

*[And] The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.** ... (vs. 11-14)*

Bound together by the Holy Spirit, we share a common mission and we have a common destiny. The connections and the gifts given by the Holy Spirit unites us together in a symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationship. We have mutual obligations to one another, we receive mutual benefits from one another's gifts and graces, and we share a mutual responsibility for each others' physical, mental, and spiritual well being. That is why we *rejoice with those who*

rejoice, weep with those who weep. [and we try to] live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:15-16)

If we understand this truth about the communion of Saints, then we will be diligent in coming together to worship and to hear God's word together, to visit the sick and shut-in, to share with those in their time of need. Our individual gifts and talents were given for everybody's benefit. The body suffers when you are not here. You suffer when you are not here.

Paul told that fractious Church in Corinth

*To each is given the
manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good. ...
1Corinthians 12:7-11*

The communion of saints not only connects us to God, but also binds us together for our common good. We are more than a family living under a one roof, we are a living organism more closely resembling the human body having different functions and gifts given to each of us for the mutual support of all of us.

My friends, if we lived out the reality of the communion of saints, within this body, and among our sister Churches. I don't doubt that revival would break out in our community. Because we would be demonstrating the one thing our modern world can neither sale nor purchase -- we have communion, we have family.

So when we say, "**I believe in the communion of saints,**" we are saying that we believe in the power of this Holy Spirit connected community of believers to help us live the lives God would have us live. It means we believe that whatever happens to one of us happens to all. Christianity is a corporate faith. There are no "lone rangers," there is no place for ammunition. We are not meant to go it alone as individual persons, individual churches, or individual denominations. We are all in this together. **WE are the communion of Saints.**

But the Communion of Saints is even bigger than just us here on earth.

The Author of Hebrews would have us understand one more astounding truth about the Communion of saints. Talking about those who have come to God in faith he said...

*You have come to ...
**the Church of the firstborn
who are enrolled in heaven ...
and to God and to the spirits
of the righteous made perfect,
and to Jesus,**
Hebrews 12:22-24*

(Hebrews 12:22-24) *you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and **to the church* of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven**, and to God the judge of all, **and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect**, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, (*the word is ekklesia "the called out assembly")*

Who is the "Church of the first born?" We are the church of the first born. Jesus who was the firstborn from the dead is the founder and current leader of our faith (c.f. Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15-18). We may not be physically in Heaven at this time, but spiritually we are already there, in the person of Jesus. Where he is we also are.

And who are "the spirits of the righteous made perfect"? These are all those who have previously died in the faith. Last week's message caused several people to ask, "*where do our loved ones go when they die?*" Here is your answer: their spirits are physically there in Heaven, with God the Father, with Jesus, and in a very real way still with us!

Hebrews chapter 11 offers us a list of past heroes of faith (some named, many unnamed) to encourage our own faith and perseverance in living the life God has called us to live. And then Hebrews 12 opens with this rather startling word of encouragement.

Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us
Hebrews 12:1-2

Who do you think makes up that "cloud of witnesses" surrounding us?

They are the *spirits of the righteous made perfect*, all those who have gone before us in the faith, They haven't left us, they have just moved from the field to the spectator stands – from the competition to the cheering section; from the church militant to the church triumphant

When we come to God in faith and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are directly connected through the Spirit back to the Father and to Christ Jesus, and to our brothers and sisters in the faith -- **to the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven – and to all the spirits of the righteous made perfect;** that cloud of witnesses who have gone before us.

Think back to the cloud of witnesses in your own life...the saints who taught you about faith. Maybe they were saints you knew personally...parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, friends who helped you find your way to faith. Or maybe they were saints of days long gone whose stories gave you inspiration or helped you in some way to be more faithful.

Hebrews tells us that here in the gathered congregation of the people of God, we also have communion with the saints in glory. We are all together as part of the same body.

We're united to Christ and they are united to Christ; and though we are separated by a vast distance, and though we do not know the specifics of what they are doing now, yet, we are united in the same activity. When we gather to worship God, we know we are doing what the saints above are doing because they too are praising God.

When you come to the Church visible, to the Church militant, to the Church local, to worship the living God, you have come to an outpost of heaven; to a little taste of that new age breaking in on this one. And when you gather round the communion table, realize that there are a lot more folk here with you than you can actually see.

That's what we sing about in the hymn, The Church's One Foundation: "*Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One, and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest in won. With all her sons and daughters, who by the Master's hand, led through the deathly waters repose in Eden's land.*" (modern versions of this hymn, for unexplained reasons, changed the last line of this stanza. C.f. <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/c/h/o/chofound.htm>).

Do You remember the Bidding prayer from the nine lessons and carols that we sing every year at Christmas? We say that we remember , "***All those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light; that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the word made flesh, and with whom, in the Lord Jesus, we are one forevermore.***"

The realization that we are in union with all our fathers and mothers, along with you brothers and sisters in the faith, and that together we are all in union with Jesus – this is what gives us the courage to press on in our own personal race towards the finish for the glory of God.

If we believe as we say in **the communion of saints**, then we see ourselves as a vital part of, vitally connected with, and vitally assisted by the family God – not only here on earth but also in Heaven. Together we worship and serve and enjoy God right now and forever. We are one very large, very connected family!

And so, it is impossible to love God and not love brothers and sisters in the faith. That is also what it means to live in the Commune of Saints. The Apostle John spoke this truth this simply

*The commandment we have from [Jesus] is this: **those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.***

1 John 4:21

Will we love, serve, and be served by the brothers/sisters here at Bedford Presbyterian Church? And in all the Churches, whatever their flavor, wherever they are world, who know Jesus Christ as savior and Lord?

May God make it so and begin with each of us. Let's pray.

STUDY GUIDE FOR: **LIVING IN THE COMMUNE OF SAINTS:**

Ephesians 4:1-14, Hebrews 12:1-2, 18-22

1. This sermon declared that the word "communion" defines a very real connection that we have through the Holy Spirit with God the Father, God the Son, and with all other Christians (both living and dead). How does this change your perspective on the life you are currently living? Discuss these verses according to this idea of such connectivity.
 - Jesus' prayer for all believers in **John 17:20-23**
 - Paul's declaration of our unity in salvation, calling, and purpose in **Ephesians 4:4-6**.
2. In the same chapter, **Ephesians 4: 11-14** and following, Paul goes on to state that the Spirit gave us gifts for the beneficial service of each other, so that we would grow up together towards what goals?
3. In **Corinthians 12**, Paul again lists out our mutually given gifts and uses the human body to illustrate our need to use those gifts symbiotically, for our mutual and corporate benefit. If you were actually a part of a human body, what part would your personal gifts best equip you to be?
4. From **Hebrews 12:1-3**, how does it make you feel, that your ancestors in the faith may be watching your life and cheering you on to the finish.
5. **Hebrews 12:22-24** states that in a spiritual but very real way that we already have a presence in Heaven with God, Jesus, and the "*spirits of the righteous made perfect,*" because we have been "*enrolled in the Church of the firstborn.*" What confidence does this give you to live more for God.
6. This sermon also stated, that the Latin word for *communion* from which we also get the words *commune, community, communication*, literally means "to build together" and that the word for those who would go it alone is *ammunition*. Have there been times when you were more ammunition than in communion with the church?
7. According to the sermon, you don't really have the choice to live in or out of communion. The reality of our spiritual life is based on our common union in Jesus Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out ... *Unity with our Christian brothers and sisters is not an ideal for which we strive but a reality in which we participate.* How then should you now be living?