

All Saints Day/November 4, 2018  
Rev 7:9-13/What is the Communion of Saints?  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church  
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“...standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes ...”

Saint, a special word, but often misunderstood. It means different things to different people. If the word saint has different meanings, what about the phrase in the Apostles' Creed the church is the Communion of Saints? What or who is the Communion of Saints?

One idea is a saint is some person of great faith from the Bible, like St. Peter or St. Mark. Others are those who lived since new testament but practiced their faith in an extraordinary way like St. Jerome or St. Augustine or even St. Nicholas. Many people think of saints as some sort of super Christians that were just plain better than the rest of us.

There are several problems with this however. For one, it gives an excuse. If we believe this, we could say, “I can't confess my faith to others very well. After all, I am no saint.” Such an attitude would cause the church to stagnate while we all waited for a saint, some super Christian, to step forward and do all the work.

Then there is the problem of giving saints godlike qualities. Small statues of saints become good luck charms as they hang from rear view mirrors. For some people, saints become like the gods of myths. Think about the patron saint of travelers, of laborers, of health, of the sea, the sky, the land, and so forth. Some people even pray to these saints.

The Bible has a different way of defining the word saint. In the greeting of most of his letters, the Apostle Paul addressed his readers

as saints. He wrote to the saints in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and so on. The Greek word Paul used is simply “holy” transformed into a noun. Instead of saying saint, we could just as easily say holy one. So, how does a person become holy? What does one look like?

The elder in today’s first reading from Revelation asked a similar question when speaking to John, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” This same elder gives the answer just a verse later, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

What a beautiful picture. Isaiah said, [Isa 64:6] “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” Now this elder tells us the blood of the Lamb removes pollution and makes our garments pure and white. This Lamb is Jesus Christ sacrificed on the cross. His holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death remove the pollution of sin and guilt from our deeds and make them righteous in God’s eyes. The work of Jesus Christ makes our deeds into white and pure robes suitable for heaven.

Saints are not people who make themselves holy, but people who receive holiness by the Father’s grace, for the Son’s sake, through the Holy Spirit’s gift of faith. Does the way we become a saint sound like the way we become a Christian? It should. All Christians are saints and all saints are Christians.

If you think you are not holy enough to be a saint then join the club. St. Matthew was a tax collector. St. Peter denied ever knowing Jesus. St. Thomas doubted Jesus rose from the dead. St. Paul called himself the chief of sinners because he persecuted the church. When Paul wrote to the saints in Corinth, he scolded them for quite a

number of problems. For one, they were abusing the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote, [1 Cor 11:20-21] "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk." Can you imagine being drunk at the Lord's Supper? However, in the greeting of his letter, he calls them saints, holy ones. They were not perfect, but they were still holy in God's eyes by faith in Jesus Christ.

What then is the Communion of Saints? It is the Communion of holy people, the communion of Christians, the communion of those who believe Jesus is both Christ and Lord. As Martin Luther said, [Large Catechism: Third Article, Para 51] But this is the meaning and substance of this addition: "I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding...."

This Communion of Saints spans two different worlds. Here on this earth, the Communion of Saints struggles with life in this sin-soaked world. We are the Church Militant. Even though Jesus defeated Satan with His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, Satan still fights and the Church Militant is the battle field. We continuously look to our Champion, Jesus Christ to give us the victory.

Then there is the Church Triumphant gathered at the throne of the Lamb, the ones who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. They returned to Paradise. They are without sin, without hunger, without misery, without tears, and without death itself. The Lamb is their Shepherd, who leads His own lambs to living fountains of water. All memory of pain, death, sin, sickness, poverty, hunger, persecution, and hatred are wiped from their eyes along with their tears.

Even though this church spans two worlds, there are not two churches: one here on earth and another in heaven. We “believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.” The oneness of the church is not destroyed even by the separation of death. For where Jesus is, there are the saints; those here on earth, and those who have “come out of the great tribulation” of life in this world. The church on earth and the church in heaven unite around the throne of God and in the presence of the Lamb. When we gather around the altar on Sunday, we know our deceased relatives and friends who have likewise “washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb” are right there with us. When we sing “Holy, holy, holy,” we do so with billions of the faithful from every time and place. When we sing “...Lamb of God, you takest away the sin of the world,” we sing along with the countless Christians of every age. When we come before the Body and Blood of the Lord, we are united with those whom we wish we could speak to but can’t. We join with those whom we love but can no longer embrace. We are not only in the presence of Jesus but are also surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, this host arrayed in white, those who fall on their face’s night and day before the Lord Himself.

So, it is proper we praise God for the men and women of faith whose works of love inspire us and set an example of the godly Christian life for us. It is appropriate we honor the work God has done in their lives to give them the true saving faith. It is also appropriate we honor the work God has done through their lives to affect the lives of the people around them. It is appropriate we honor those who have preceded us into the Church Triumphant.

For when we honor the redeemed, we are also honoring the Redeemer. The saints who are holy in God’s eyes testify to the only One who is eternally holy: our Lord Jesus Christ. It is His blood that

covers our sin and allows us to stand in His presence. It is being baptized into His death that gives us a white robe. It is His Word and Sacraments that usher us into the throne room where we will never again suffer or be unhappy.

What then shall we do while we wait for our turn to leave the battle of this world and enter the rest our Savior has prepared for us? Life in this world is hard. Although we are saints in God's eyes, we still sin. The battle with sin rages around us and in us. We live in the great tribulation.

But the Savior promises never to leave us or forsake us. Though we live in a mortal body decaying with sin, these bodies will be raised and made new. Though our worship is imperfect, it will be perfected. Though our voices crack, they will one day sing in perfect harmony with angels. Though we're tired and distracted, hungry and bored, we will one day be so alive and filled with joy that we will never grow weary of joining this great crowd in heaven, singing and praising God.

Dear friends, you who believe are already saints. By His death on the cross, the Lord Himself clothes you with His righteousness, and through His resurrection He will one day shepherd you to everlasting life. In that blessed place you will experience the eternal joy of God's presence along with the rest of the Communion of Saints.