

Hebrews 11:32-40

“The Communion of Saints”

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6th Sunday before Easter

Our sermon text this morning is Hebrew 11:32-40. I invite you to listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as we come to the end of Hebrews 11. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated — 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Every time we confess the Apostle's Creed, we confess together that we believe in "the communion of saints." The "communion of saints." That's what we believe in. But what does this phrase actually mean?

Put simply, to say that we believe in the communion of saints means that we believe that our faith in Christ is not something we participate in alone.

No, by professing our belief in the communion of saints, we are confessing that we who are united to Jesus by faith are part of something far bigger than ourselves, that we are living participants in a communion of all the saints that worship God around the world today (which probably is at least one billion), along with all the saints who have died before us.

This communion that we share with all the saints of God isn't based on a bond that we create, of course - no, it is because all who belong to Jesus are gathered together in him - "In him, all things hold together" as Paul says in Colossians, and we are united in the One Christ by the One and Same Holy Spirit, who unites us to Jesus and to the communion of Saints by means of his mystical person and power.

To believe in the communion of saints is to understand that, as Paul writes in Ephesians, there is *"One body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

And in many ways, the communion of saints is what the entire chapter of Hebrews 11, including our passage this morning is all about.

Remember the context of Hebrews 11. And the end of Hebrews 10, the apostle is reminding his readers of who they are in the face of the suffering they are experiencing in their contemporary context. He writes in Hebrews 10:39: *"But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and persevere their souls."*

"You are of those who have faith," the Apostle says.

And then he tells his readers (and us) of the communion of saints that they (and we) participate in. This is who you are, he is saying. These are your people. This is your story. This is the communion you belong to. These are fathers and your mothers, your sisters and your brothers.

And he tells them the story of the saints - beginning at the very beginning of time with Abel and Enoch and Noah, continuing with Abraham and Sarah, following the line of patriarchs through Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, describing the calling of the people of Israel with Moses and Joshua and Rahab, and finally, in our passage this morning summing up the whole story of the people of God with these majestic words:

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah [all judges who delivered Israel from her enemies], of David and Samuel [the men who established the monarchy in Israel] and the prophets — 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms [think of David, Gideon, Barak], enforced justice [remember the story of Solomon], obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions [Daniel], 34 quenched the power of fire [Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego], escaped the edge of the sword [think of David escaping again and again from the hand of Saul, or Elijah when he fled from Jezebel], were made strong out of weakness [Think of Samson blinded and enslaved, defeating the Philistines and losing his own life, or Esther bravely facing Xerxes to plead for her people], became mighty in war [think of David facing Goliath], put foreign armies to flight [Joshua defeating the armies of Canaan]. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection [Consider the widow of Zarephath, whose son was raised from the dead by Elijah, or the Shunammite woman whose son was raised by Elisha, or the widow of Nain whose son was raised by Jesus, or Mary and Martha, who received Lazarus back from the dead]. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life [Consider the story of Jeremiah, or the death of Stephen, which fits this description exactly]. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with

the sword [In these verses, the Apostle likely refers to the experience of the Apostles and the early church, who experienced the persecution of Israel and Rome - the martyrdoms and suffering of Stephen, James and many others]. *They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated — 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

“Of whom the world was not worthy...” Somehow that line captures it all - the glory, the power, the wonder, the mystery of us today being part of this story - this story of all the people of God throughout all the ages.

Sometimes Hebrews 11 is referred to in popular terms as the “Hall of Fame” of the Bible. You might have heard that before.

I have very self-consciously *not* referred to Hebrews in that way over the past weeks as I’ve preached through this chapter, and the reason for that is the term “Hall of Fame” implies an elite, exclusive club - a place where the few are enshrined and everyone else, the common people, just admires them.

And friends, an elite, exclusive club is exactly the opposite of what Hebrews 11 is meant to be.

The whole point of this chapter is that the very same Spirit that dwelt in Abel and Enoch and Noah dwells in us. The whole point of this chapter is that the faith of Abraham and Sarah is the same faith that we are called to embrace. The whole point of this chapter is that the story of Joseph and Moses and Joshua and Rahab and David is our story.

Beloved, Hebrews 11 is not a Hall of Fame. It is a family history. And it is *our* family history - the family history of anyone who belongs to Jesus.

And importantly, Hebrews 11 is not just a family history that sits on a shelf somewhere, dusty with age - no - Hebrews 11 is a living community - a living community that we participate in today.

As we read in verses 39-40 and the first verse of Hebrews 12:

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. 1 Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run the race with endurance, looking to Jesus.

Beloved, the underlying assumption of Hebrews 11 is the communion of saints.

The assumption of Hebrews 11 is that these stories matter to us not just because they're inspiring examples of ancient faith but because we actually, even today, even right now, share communion with these men and women through our unchanging and ever-living Lord Jesus Christ.

The picture here is that the dead in Christ, the saints who have gone before us are waiting for us now, they are waiting for us to join them in glory, they are waiting with us for the Last Great Day, when we all will experience the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of creation and will dwell with Jesus himself in the new heavens and new earth.

And even now, we commune with the saints in heaven, with the dead in Christ. We worship with them every Lord's Day. In some mysterious and strange way, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we worship with them and they worship with us.

As the Apostle puts it in Hebrews 12, describing Christian Lord's Day worship: *18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest...22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

This, beloved, is what it means to participate in the communion of saints. To recognize that you are never alone in your faith, but you actually share fellowship and communion with not only all the believers alive today around the world, but also with all the dead in Christ throughout the ages as well.

In other words, in your faith today, you share in fellowship and communion not only with the brothers and sisters in Christ in this room, but with men and women who crossed the Red Sea and sang and danced at the defeat of Pharaoh's armies, with those faithful Jews who were exiled from Jerusalem but clung to their faith in Babylon, with early Roman Christians in the first century who left paganism to embrace the waters of baptism, with barbarians in Northern Europe who received the gospel preached to them, with African Christians in the first centuries of the church who established communities of great theological learning and instruction, with Irish monks who preserved the scriptures from the Viking horde, with slaves in South America who worshiped Christ centuries ago, with Asian converts who heard the gospel and believed, with your own great-grandparents and grand-parents and parents if you were born into a Christian family.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

These are your people. This is the people whom you belong to.

As one commentator puts it, the communion of saints is “a huge community that stretches back in time, encircles the world, and reaches far out into the future and up into heaven. We are part of an eternal community, the communion of saints, which includes the people of God from all time. We are all part of the same assembly before God. We all travel the same journey and we reach our destination together.”

So, two applications this morning from our passage.

The first is this. I think that this passage encourages us to remember the dead in Christ.

We're so weird these days about death. I mean let's just be honest. We have no idea what to do with death in our culture today. We have no idea what to do with grief or people who grieve or people who miss their loved ones who have died.

If someone keeps talking about a person who has died - I mean, we'll give them a month or two, but after that we're half-tempted to think there's something wrong with them. That's what we do with the dead these days. We put them out of sight and mind and if someone isn't ready to move on, we think it's kind of awkward.

But, beloved, I want you to see that this passage gives you the freedom and blessing to remember the dead in Christ that you have had the privilege to know and love.

This passage says to you - you don't ever have to forget those who have died in Christ, and in fact, you shouldn't, because they are a part of the communion of saints to which you yourself belong.

This passage not only gives you the freedom to grieve those the saints who have passed on before you, but also the confidence to know that you are still in communion with them even now through our Lord Jesus.

And that's part of why I've introduced a litany recently that explicitly invites us to remember the dead in Christ and give thanks to God for their lives.

It's because of passages like this. It's because of our confession of our belief in the communion of Saints.

I don't know who you think about when we pause for a few moments of silent reflection. I don't know who you name before the Lord.

For me, it's Pauline. It's Jerry and Jeanie. It's Mary, and Hal, and Anne. It's my friend, Nathan Ribelin. It's my grandparents James and Joyce and Tom and Alice, and my great-grandparents, James and Mabel and Lucien and Edith. Those are some of the name I remember and give thanks for.

Like, I said, I don't know who you name before the Lord.

But when we pray that litany, I hope you take those few seconds to remember the dead as this passage encourages you to do, to remember those faces and names in the great cloud of witness whom you know personally, to remember those men and women before the Lord and give thanks to God for their lives.

Because this passage, Hebrews 11, is inviting us to remember the dead.

The second application is this. I think that this passage embrace the truth that we are part of a story that is far bigger than us.

There is so much pressure today for us to figure out who we are, what our identity is, what the meaning of our individual life should be.

I mean, people drive themselves crazy trying to do that.

But, beloved, what I want you to see is that you don't have to do that. You really don't. It's a fool's errand, anyway. No one can bear that weight.

Friend, to be a Christian is to be a person who is given a story that you didn't create for yourself. It has been given to you. And it is a gift, in the deepest sense of the word.

It is a story of the people of God from the beginning of time that stretches forward into the future until when that day comes that brings time's end.

And beloved, all you have to do is play your part in the story. All you have to do is be faithful in the place where the Lord has put you, whatever that place is.

You don't have to save the world. You don't have to cure cancer. You don't have to create a legacy or a name for yourself.

Because you already possess a legacy. You already have been given a name. You already have a story.

And it's the greatest, most important, most exciting story that exists in the history of the human race. It's the story of the people of God, of those men and women of whom the world is not worthy.

That's your story. That's who you are. And all you have to do is play your part. And beloved, that's good news indeed.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.