

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: March 11, 2018
Sermon Title: Communion of Saints
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Isaiah 31:10; Psalm 92:12; Matthew 13:43

Scripture

"Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds." Isaiah 31:10

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon." Psalm 92:12

"Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of God." Matthew 13:43

Sermon topics arrive in funny ways. An idea pops into my head. Or "Divine" inspiration. Or one of you may suggest something. Sometimes events around the world may dictate a sermon, cry out for a response. Sacred and secular holidays yield sermons from July 4th to Thanksgiving to Easter.

The genesis of today's sermon is more mundane. Our organist saw an announcement in the bulletin about my short story, "Communion of Saints," and wanted to know if I would be preaching about "saints" today; and if so, the choir anthem could be "For All the Saints." I emailed her back saying I wasn't preaching about saints, just doing a Bible story on my short story, "Communion of Saints." Then the nor'easter came with that heavy snow, canceling my Bible Study, so I decided, what the heck, I'll preach about saints, the choir can sing "For All the Saints," and I'll work in my short story, even as the sermon title, "Communion of Saints."

The short story, "Communion of Saints," is one of the more mystical and quirkier ones in my new book. The title, as some of you will recognize, comes from the Apostles' Creed, that ancient statement of faith that defines basic Christian beliefs: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son . . . Who was crucified, died and was buried . . . And rose again." Then there is the concluding list of beliefs: "I

believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the life everlasting and the Communion of Saints.” (abridged)

The Communion of Saints. What’s that? Well just like my short story, it’s mystical and quirky. In Christianity, the Communion of Saints is *Us* plus *Them*. Us: when we are at our best, when we are aiming high, when Christlikeness is our goal. Us, plus Them: all the good folks who have lived their best and died. They lived Christlikeness a cut above the rest, they aimed high and did it more often than most. And they are around us as inspiration, as models, as reminders, as motivators. Taken together, you and I, with our striving toward Christ, plus the memories of those who have made it to Christ, together we are the Communion of Saints.

My short story is sort of that, but quirrier. In the story, I have a dream that leads me up to rural Maine, my family roots in Mechanic Falls. Spurred on by the dream, I find that old mill town and a host of strangers who treat me like family, bringing long-dead relatives to life and making the gap between heaven and earth, the dead and the living, the past and the present, memory and reality . . . well, the gap’s not that wide.

I find my “Communion of Saints” up there. I find people, living and dead, for whom the reality of faith is real, for whom living faith is alive, for whom here and there are next door. And Martians. Yes, Martians. To figure it all out, you have to read the story.

If Bible study hadn’t been snowed out, we would have looked at that story and looked at some Bible verses connected to the story. Verses about belief, heaven, work, family, and even Martians. But, in addition to my story, events all week long kept me thinking about saints, and the Communion of Saints, and what makes a saint, anyway?

And the final piece was that opening hymn—boy, that was something! You may have noticed when you come to worship here at Greenfield Hill, we put a lot of words into your mouth! There is a long, detailed Prayer of Confession, there’s the Lord’s Prayer, the Offering Dedication. Today, I even had you say the three Scriptures out loud.

Over the course of a Sunday, we make you confess stuff, commit to stuff, promise stuff, which is all to the good. Because, after all, we come to Church because this is the location of the Holy, the Lofty, the Ideal, the Hopeful, the Sacred, and dare I say Perfection. This is the place where saints get started. We’re not *holy* or *ideal* or *sacred* or *perfect*, but this is the place were we talk about it, aim for it, try for it.

I may not "love my enemy or my neighbor" when I'm out there, but at least in here, I'm forced to think about it. I mean, I may not be keen on forgiveness, but in here, I'm forced to say it every time we say the Lord's Prayer. I may not want to be "meek" or "merciful" or any of those Christlike virtues out there, but in here, on any given Sunday, we'll hear Jesus talking about it.

Church is designed to push us, me included, farther than we want to go. And today's hymn did that in spades! "Community of Christ," we sang, "Community of Christ," that's us.

*Community of Christ,
who make the cross your own,
live out your creed and risk your life
for God alone:
the God who wears your face,
to whom all worlds belong,
whose children are of every race
and every song.*

*Community of Christ,
look past the Church's door
and see the refugee, the hungry,
and the poor.
Take hands with the oppressed,
the jobless in your street,
take towel and water, that you wash
your neighbor's feet.*

*Community of Christ,
through whom the word must sound --
cry out for justice and for peace
the whole world round:
disarm the powers that war
and all that can destroy,
turn bombs to bread, and tears of anguish
into joy.*

*When menace melts away,
so shall God's will be done,
the climate of the world be peace
and Christ its sun;
our currency be love
and kindness our law,*

*our food and faith be shared as one
for evermore.*

Wow, that doesn't mince words, does it? In my youthful years, the mentors who most shaped me were quite physical. They'd grab me by the ear or the nape of the neck, first to get my attention and then point me in the right direction. It wasn't subtle. That hymn isn't subtle. You are in Church. You are at worship. You claim to be a Christian. So, Boom! The hymn hits you right between the eyes with this is what you're supposed to be: the Community of Christ, the gathering of saints, the "Communion of Saints." Us.

It may not be what we are, yet, or always. But Church always points us to what we can be, should be, always.

We're really linking two thoughts together today: Saints and Community, together. "Saint" literally means holy or sacred; and "holy" literally means "set apart." Something, or someone special. To be considered a saint just means that person has lived their life a cut above the rest of us. We are not saying they're divine or even perfect. But let's face it, they are not like most of us.

I, for example, am a nice enough guy. I go to India a lot. And I'm *not* Mother Teresa. She's a saint. I'm not. I ran into a couple of examples of that this week. First, the *New York Times* had an article about teachers and school killings by guns and whether teachers should be armed—that whole debate.

The article interviewed Florida teachers. "Inside, under the glare of fluorescent lights, Bruce Klasner, 61, of Everglades High, said, 'I teach the Holocaust' . . . 'I taught them,' he said of his students, 'about a man by the name of Janusz Korczak who walked into the gas chambers with his children because he refused to leave them. And after this happened my kids are sitting outside saying, 'Mr. K, would you give your life for me?'" "Mr. Klasner said he would—of course. "I said, 'Did you even have to ask?'" (Turkewitz, Julie. "School Shootings Put Teachers in New Role as Human Shields." *The New York Times*, 19 Feb. 2018, p. A12.)

The second event was on Monday night. I took part in an American Legion event to honor a special group of people known collectively as "the Four Chaplains." On February 3, 1943, a US Army transport ship, the U.S.S. *Dorchester*, with 902 soldiers onboard, was torpedoed off the coast of Newfoundland. It sank in 18 minutes. So you can imagine how horrible those 18 minutes were, as soldiers struggled in the dark to find their way up to the deck to put on life preservers and escape to the freezing water. In the last moments, the four chaplains, two Protestants, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi, gave up their life jackets to other soldiers, and linking arms in prayer, chose to go down with the ship.

On Monday night four Fairfield clergy were asked to speak and to light a candle for each chaplain. This year, the recurring theme from each of us, including the veterans there, Mike Tetreau, and the clergy was the same—not by design, but by the times in which we live. What would we have done? Would we have given up our life preserver? Note that in both examples is the power of their collective act: the orphanage director with the orphans; the four chaplains, arm in arm. They stood together, they sacrificed together. They were a “Communion of Saints.”

Do you ever wonder what makes people like that? What makes a saint? What makes some people run into a burning building? The Twin Towers on 9/11? A challenge, a crisis, a danger? It’s not so much the difference between a saint and a louse. What we need to know is the difference between a saint and a bystander, a do-nothing.

I love the verses I had you speak out loud earlier. They were all about what the Bible calls “righteous” people. People who do things right, live right. The Prophet Isaiah said, “Tell the righteous it will be well with them. They will enjoy the fruit of their deed.” (Isaiah 3:10) The Psalmist promises, “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree. They will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.” (Psalm 92:12) And Jesus says, “The righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of God.” (Matthew 13:43)

Those folks, the righteous, the saints, they see the big picture. They’re in it for the long term. They’ll make sacrifices now because they believe in tomorrow.

Those four chaplains didn’t waste their lives. They were investing in us. In 1943, in the freezing waters off Newfoundland, they invested in 2018, believing what they did would make our world better. They are “shining like the sun in the Kingdom of God,” “flourishing like a palm tree,” “enjoying the fruit of their deeds.”

This week I had lunch with Jon Passmore. He’s usually up in the choir loft. He had a long career with GE, but now he’s writing a book about his real passion: Rugby! The Rugby World Cup is coming up in two years, and he’s going to explain it to all of us who aren’t from England or New Zealand. At lunch, he told me a story about New Zealand’s legendary rugby team, “The ALL Blacks,” the team that year after year, generation after generation, is the height of excellence.

Jon outlined the characteristics that make them great: unselfish, hard working, disciplined, pulling together, sacrifice. No big heads. No big egos. No “me, me, me, I, I, I.” And then Jon told me about this New Zealand Rugby ALL Blacks

tradition. When the game is over, and the fans have left, cheering, and the reporters have gone home to file their stories, he said, two players, usually senior players, the pride of the team, they each pick up a long-handled broom and clean the sheds. They sweep the locker rooms, they walk the grounds, they tidy up. The fans, they're reveling in the game just past. Lesser players, they're licking their wounds, complaining about the refs, but the best of the best? They're getting things ready for tomorrow, the next game, the next generation.

Now, this may be the first time that rugby players and saints are mentioned in the same sentence, given that rugby is famous for blood, beer, and bruises. Two out of three of those characteristics may pave the way to saintliness: blood and bruises; and the beer might smooth the way. The points in common are to believe in something enough to give it your best, even your all

We need more gumption in Church. We need more courage in religion. We need more Christ in Christianity. And my guess is that happens more likely the tighter we are together. It's called "The Communion of Saints." Communion, community, is, by definition, a group effort, a group experience. And "saints" is plural! You can't have a "communion of *saint*," singular. And even in my humble short story, the "communion of saints" comes about when I break out of my singular, solitary, self-centered life and open myself up to the unlikely saints of rural Maine, past and present. That's the power of faith. We admire it on the battlefield; we cheer it on the playing field. We need more of it in Church.

So I've given you rugby players and soldiers and saints. The choir has given you an anthem that honors all the greats in our lives who paved a path for us. Our opening hymn boldly dared you to be a "Community of Christ," willing to tackle the worst the world has to offer.

In three weeks we'll be back for Easter. Jesus looking you straight in the eye, saying, "Ha! See what I've done! Now you do it!" Until then, we'll settle for challenge of our final hymn, No. 648, "Some There Are Who by Their Living."

*Some there are who by their living
Lift us to a higher plane,
Finding joy disclosed as sorrow,
Healing hidden in their pain.
They are drawn by brighter visions,
Glad to give all they possess
For a greater good, discovering
Holier depths of happiness.*

Some there are who by their loving

*Lead us far beyond our fears.
Showing us by their compassion
Hatred washed away by tears.
When contempts that we inherit
Fill us with hostility,
we have hope because of persons
Who have known love's liberty.*

*Some there are who by their dying
draw us closer to the light
finding death a blessed journey
into that most gracious night.
When we feel the sting of knowing
That our days are brief and swift.
We remember those whose living
met each moment as a gift.*

*Thanks to God for those inviting
us to live more faithfully!
Thanks to God for those who show us
Richer lives of charity!
Thanks for those we see no longer,
but whose mem'ries in us lie!
Thanks to God for those to teach us
How to live and how to die!*