

“The Communion of Saints”

Date: November 5, 2017 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Text:** Matthew 5:1-12
Themes: Holiness; All Saints Day

John Wesley, the Anglican preacher from England in the 18th century, who founded, unwittingly, a new church called Methodism, loved this day. Wesley kept a journal, a spiritual diary if you will, and every November 1st reveals his fondness for All Saints Day.

Methodists have historically celebrated All Saints Day, rejoicing in the saints who have gone before us, and sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion - a visible reminder of our communion with Christians in all ages and places: yesterday, today and tomorrow.

It is a kind of Memorial Day for Christians, a day to remember those who have run the race before us and who have gone home to receive their prize in Heaven. It's a day to give thanks for God's faithfulness in all generations. For in every age, God is faithful to raise up Christians, who by their very lives give witness to God's love and grace and mercy.

From the beginning, the church has addressed the need to recall with thanksgiving the lives and witnesses of faithful men and women, known and unknown, who have accepted with devotion the call to the gospel of Jesus Christ, saints who read the Beatitudes as a means to bring the grace of God's kingdom of love into their own world.

The earliest reference to such a day is a feast day for all martyrs of the church, observed in the fourth century by St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople. By the seventh century such a day was observed as a holy day throughout the Eastern Church, a feast day for all the saints of the church. In 835, Pope Gregory IV established November 1st as the feast day in the Western Church.

All Saints Day was, in the beginning, a day of recognition of those who had died as martyrs for the Christian faith. Later the celebration was broadened to include all Christians who had died and gone to be with their Lord, Jesus Christ.

But the veneration of the saints is a practice that has a mixed track record in the church. For a time, it was helpful and encouraging to recall the heroes of the faith, who courageously stood the test, and died rather than deny their loyalty to Jesus.

But later practice corrupted this ideal. People begin to worship the saints themselves. Relics of the saints were thought to have healing properties, almost in a magical sense. People began to believe that God was so holy you couldn't talk to God directly, you needed a messenger to carry your prayer to the Lord. And so the practice developed of praying to the saints instead of to God.

At the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, it was both right and proper to reform this practice of revering the saints. The practice had been abused. Some reformed churches did away with anything having to do with the remembrance of the saints. They devoted themselves solely to the worship of Christ and did away with anything having to do with the saints.

In 1784, when John Wesley created his own version of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, he omitted the entire cycle of saints days. He emphasized the saving and sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ. But that does not mean that Wesley did not know of, or believe in, the great heroes of the faith as manifestations of the power of God's grace, at work in real people.

Wesley was open to the fact that saints did serve a valuable goal in forming and sustaining faith, hope and love. Indeed, the notion of saints in the biblical sense – people made holy by the sanctifying power of the Spirit of Jesus was powerful to Mr. Wesley.

One of the gifts that Methodism brings to the wider church is our emphasis on the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Not only are we justified by grace, we are made holy by grace. Wesley urged the Methodists to go on to perfection, that is, to be made perfect in love.

So, for Wesley, he does not go so far as to *praise* the saints; rather, he *gives thanks* to God for them. So, he avoids the extremes of certain cults developing around

some person other than God. On the other hand, he thinks it is the height of superstition to avoid any mention of the saints in the context of prayer and worship. Wesley chooses a middle way.

In every generation, God has called forth men and women to be his holy people, to be God's witnesses to a holy life. We need men and women who inspire us, who encourage us, who guide us in our own Christian journey. You see, we are not solitary islands in the vast ocean of humanity.

We are a link in a great human chain. All Saints Day reminds us that we are not alone in our faith journey. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, that long line of Christians who have gone before us. In the great spiritual arena of life, they are in the stadium of Heaven, cheering us on as we live our lives as faithfully as we can, day by day. They have been where we are, and they urge us to be faithful and holy.

As good Methodists, we would do well to heed Mr. Wesley's advice, and not worship the saints who went before us. Our attention, therefore, should not be so much on them and their good works, as worthy as they are, but rather, we praise God for the work of grace in their lives.

All Saints Day is rightfully centered on Jesus Christ and the way that he changes lives. This is not a day to worship the saints themselves, but a day to celebrate what Jesus can do in a person's life. It is a paradox but a truth: we do not get into Heaven by being good. We get into Heaven by faith, faith in Jesus Christ. And He is the one who makes us good.

It is the grace of Jesus Christ at work in our lives that enables us to live out the Beatitudes. On our own, we fall woefully short. But with the grace of Jesus Christ at work in our lives, slowly, slowly we begin to change and our will bends more and more toward that lovely life of grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, and those who mourn; blessed are the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, and the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers; and blessed are those who are persecuted.

I don't create those virtues in my life; Jesus Christ does. The saints who went before us, they had their faults too. But we remember that Jesus was at work in their lives. Our work, as Christians, is not to imitate saints by trying to be as good as they were. Our calling is to be open and receptive to the work of Jesus in our own lives.

Today, let us celebrate God's grace at work in the lives of saints, including our own. Amen? Amen!