

WGUMC July 2, 2017 “the communion of saints”
Leviticus 19:1-2 I Corinthians 1:1-3

Being married to a Catholic has been an education for me. For one thing, I know a lot more about saints than I used to. I even got myself a copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Did you know there’s a patron saint for pawn-brokers? repentant prostitutes? syphilis sufferers? Indeed there seems to be a patron saint for almost everything. There’s a patron saint of healthy dogs and a different one for mad dogs, a patron saint for married women and another one for unhappily married women.

If I were a Catholic, I'd have to carry the book with me just to know who I was supposed to pray to in any given situation. Or I could just be a Methodist. We don't pray to individual saints, but we do embrace the whole group of them. The Apostles' Creed says that we believe in the communion of saints. But what does that mean?

Typically, we think of the communion of saints as the company of faithful believers who have died and gone before us. The hymn says: “For all the saints, who from their labors rest.” But actually, the communion of saints includes all believers, living and dead, on earth as well as in heaven. As the fourth verse goes: “O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.”

You wouldn't necessarily get that from reading Paul's letters, for he concentrates almost entirely on living saints, not dead ones. His passion is for the communion of saints in his churches. And so we read the passage today: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...." Here and now and not just there and then, we are called to be saints. "On earth as it is in heaven."

I take Paul's lead today because I don't want the focus on dead saints to divert us from our call to be living disciples. We don't believe in the communion of saints as a group of folks who are supremely holy and good so we don't have to be. Sorry, you can pay a pastor but you can't buy yourself a surrogate saint. Paul says all of us are part of that holy league, so we'd better step up to the plate.

John Wesley was big on holy living. With the grace of God, we really can be saints, we really can be made perfect in love: that is the central theme of his 65-year preaching career. But I fear that many of his 21st-century followers are not so sure. Honestly, we'd rather be successful than saintly. Even those of us who aspire to be Christian tend to have a DIY mentality when it comes to spirituality. We think we don't really need the church.

But what we can't get from a self-help book or a weekend seminar or a long silent retreat is the messy, noisy, life-saving grace

of community. At its best, the communion of saints is a community of mutual support and accountability. We need the communion of saints to support us in our search for God and to hold us to a higher standard as we try to live for God. You see, we can't be saints in single file. We can't be holy on our own. Wesley said that "Christianity is essentially a social religion" and "to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it." ["Sermon on the Mount IV"] Me-Myself-and I is a pretty sorry substitute for the communion of saints.

But even the Church is struggling with how to be a community these days. Whatever happened to potluck suppers, skating parties, and church basketball leagues? Probably the same thing that happened to knowing the names of your neighbors, supporting public schools, and eating at least one meal a day with your spouse and kids. Something is gone and even we don't know how to get it back. We wonder: are there still any genuine communities of mutual support and accountability?

Let me tell you about one in North Carolina. In 2003, Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrave were in the Anbar Province of Iraq as part of a Christian Peacemaker Team. They had gone there before the invasion to bring the message that not all Americans were in favor of the war. But about a week after the bombs started to fall, their team decided they were going to have to get out of the country. As they were trying to leave, one of the cars they were traveling in ran

over some shrapnel, blew a tire and flipped over. Three of the team members were injured. Just then some Iraqis drove up and took them to a hospital in a town called Rutba. A doctor there spoke to them in perfect English, "Three days ago, your country bombed our hospital. But we will take care of you."

Jonathan and Leah were so impressed by this Muslim Good Samaritan that they went back to Duke University and started Rutba House in Walltown, which is a poor, mostly African American neighborhood in Durham. The people who live at Rutba House, some of them formerly homeless, share a common life. They pray and eat together. They give each other support and they actively extend hospitality to strangers. They practice what they call a "modified common-purse economy," which means that members who work full or part time contribute 30% to 40% of their income to the common purse. That covers household expenses with enough left over to help those in the neighborhood who are in need.

I don't know if they intended to or not, but Jonathan and Leah started a movement that is now known as "the new monasticism." And it's about time. When the first monastic communities arose in the 4th and 5th centuries, they were an attempt to get back to the values of the first Christians who, according to the Book of Acts, gathered together in each other's houses and devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship, the breaking of bread

and the prayers. Not only that, but they held all things in common and there was not a needy person among them. [Acts 2:41-47, 4:32-37]

It probably strikes you as hopelessly idealistic to want to return to that communal lifestyle and live by those early Christian values. No one lives by those values anymore; no one, that is, who isn't poor. When Libby Echeverria, who is a medical social worker at Valley Med's Homeless Healthcare Clinic, did her workshop for us on poverty and homelessness in Santa Clara County last year, she talked about the values of the poor. One of the things she taught us is that the poor have a very different attitude about money than most of us do.

For the rich, who have everything they could ever need or want, money is something to invest. For the middle class, who have enough now, but aren't sure that they will have enough for the future, money is something to save. But for the poor, who have next to nothing, money is something to use, to either spend or give away.

Consider a homeless person who has finally scraped up enough money to put down a deposit on a room. Then she gets a call from a friend or family member who is in jail and needs her to post bail. Without thinking about it, she takes all of the money she has saved and gives it to the bondsmen. While this makes no sense to those of us who have a roof over our head, it makes perfect sense to those

who don't. They know that they need that friend or family member more than they need a place to sleep. And they will bail a friend out today, because they may need that friend to bail them out tomorrow. On the matter of money, the homeless give us a different perspective on Christian values and what it means to be a communion of saints. We have a lot to learn from them.

I'm probably not the only member of my generation wondering if I will be homeless myself one day. As a Methodist minister who has always lived in parsonages, I have never owned a home and doubt that I will be able to buy one when I retire, if I ever get to retire. So, the new monasticism might just be the key for me. As boomers age and housing gets more and more expensive, communal living begins to look like an idea whose time is coming. The older I get, the more I think that I would like to have that kind of intentional community of support and accountability. I would love to be with other people who want to eat together, pray together, be good neighbors and take in strangers. I bet I could recruit some of my clergy brothers and sisters.

But we don't have to wait until we retire from the rat race to start living in a way that is more beneficial to the human race. In fact, we can be a communion of saints starting this Wednesday. Ever since the warming centers shut down at the end of April, the Village House women have had to be on the streets all day long, and to be

honest, they haven't done very well. Libby tells me that they are feeling "homeless" again and it has taken a toll on their health.

My heart sank when I heard that, so I began to think if there was something, anything, we could do. And I got to thinking, with very little effort, we could at least give them a place to get off the street and out of the heat, for a few hours a day. The members of St. Martin of Tours are going to help us, very much in the spirit of their namesake saint.

Martin of Tours has an interesting story, beginning when he was a young soldier in the Roman army, stationed in Gaul in the 4th century. One day when approaching the gate of the city of Amiens, he met a poor beggar with barely any clothes. Seeing this man suffering, he drew his sword and cut his own cape in two and gave half of it to the man. Then he heard Jesus say to the angels, "Martin, who is but a catechumen [a not yet baptized follower of Jesus], has clothed me with this robe." Martin did get baptized and later left the army, becoming one of the first conscientious objectors. He said, "I am the soldier of Christ. It is not lawful for me to fight."

Some churches get named after dead saints, but I want this church to be known for its living ones. So I say to the Church of God in Willow Glen: St. Ruby, St. Grace, St. Al, and St. Walt are gone now. Here on earth, there are a few vacancies in the communion of saints. It is our job to fill them. But if it takes a village to raise a child, it

takes a church to raise a Christian and a communion to raise a saint. Have you applied for the position? Don't think you aren't qualified. Paul says that you are qualified because you are sanctified in Jesus Christ. You are called to be saints. The world and Willow Glen and the women of Village House are waiting. So be it. Go to it.