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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
November 1, 2009 (All Saints Day)

Revelations 21:1–6

## COMMUNION OF SAINTS

In my introduction of listing places we don't normally go in a worship service, I left out one place: the *Book of Confessions*. Every minister who has ever stood before you, every elder or deacon who has been placed within the function of being a spiritual leader in the church, has made a promise that they, indeed, would rely upon the confessions of the church as reliable expositions of what the scripture teaches us to believe. And every one of them—ministers, elders, and deacons alike—made that promise like this [with crossed fingers]. Because in all likelihood, the creeds and the confessions, even if they had been studied, took second place in priority (and they should) to scripture; but maybe even further down the line is how often we actually opened those confessions and read them and allowed them to speak to our hearts.

Now I'm sure there are notable exceptions within this congregation. There are elders and deacons who understand these creeds and can explain them in child-like terms that are understandable. To them I offer my apologies, but today let us take one section of one creed and make it our own, on this day that we think somehow we shouldn't be observing or that we're not quite sure how to observe. You all did give your children gifts this morning, right? There were baskets prepared, just like on Easter, to celebrate All Saints Day? No? You didn't see any All Saints Day memorabilia? You had to look hard in the Hallmark rack to even find an All Saints Day card?

From the Westminster Confession of Faith: "All Saints, being united to Jesus Christ, their head, by his spirit written by faith have fellowship with him in his graces, suffering death, resurrection and glory, and being united to one another in love they have communion in each other's gifts and graces." And then it continues (as if written for a Presbyterian heart) ... "and are obliged to the performance of such duties public and private as to conduce to their mutual good both in the inward and the outward man."

Doesn't that just make the cockles of your heart stir with warmth? Those words so familiar to you, right? They describe what we believe about things—all things being united to Jesus Christ.

Even if we're unfamiliar with our confessional heritage, we know instinctively who is the head of the church. And it's not the pastor, is it? The head of the church is ... Jesus Christ. You knew it. Good. And we confessed that. And we are united with Christ. The essence of what we believe about salvation is that we are one with Christ. And in our union, the work of salvation is the rewards that Christ has won for us. The saving action of Christ on the cross is obedience even unto death and his resurrection—the sacrifice that defines and redefines how we live with one another. These are all the work of our

Savior—a work for which you and I have received the rewards—work which we didn't do.

And maybe that's why we're so uncomfortable with it. We don't like taking what we haven't earned, do we? We don't like getting awards of accolades for things that we didn't accomplish. None of us would dare to accept the Gold Award in Girl Scouting or the Eagle Award for Boy Scouting if we had not done the work. We just wouldn't take it. We know better. And yet, in order to be in union with Christ, we have to accept the work that we never performed. And because of that, yes, some do feel obligated; but more importantly, many feel free and liberated to accept the transformation that goes along with that reward.

Here is who we are. Here is what we believe. God calls us, and the Holy Spirit prompts our spirit to respond. Because we are united with Christ in this very fearful and real manner, we can no longer live as we did before. You said it. Jesus is the head of this body. Jesus is our means of reconciliation with God, and we belong to God through Christ.

Here's how Calvin said it. This is a wonderful exchange. Now, I'm not any more well-versed in Calvin than I am in these confessions. I mean I studied them at one time, yes, and I can make sense of the institutes if I have to; but they're not my bedtime reading. I don't have Calvin on tape. Sorry. But I dare say he doesn't use the word *wonderful* very often. It's just not a Calvin word—a little too touchy-feely. Calvin says: "The wonderful exchange of his measureless benevolence (meaning Christ) with us, because as he became man, he allowed us to become sons of God.

Do you get it? The Son of God became one of us so that we could again inherit our destiny—our fate, our purpose for being—to be obedient children of God. Calvin says the Son of God descended to earth so that we could learn to ascend to heaven. He took on mortality that we might be conferred his immortality. Yes, and he accepted our weakness so that we could take on his strength. He received our poverty in order to transfer to us his wealth, and he carried the weight of our sinfulness in order to remove the oppressive weight of guilt in our lives, and has clothed us with righteousness.

Do you want to be a saint and know it? Then let go of the guilt. Would you like to look at yourself in the mirror and see someone clothed with righteousness? This is what this day is about. If we cannot see ourselves as saints: St. Carl and St. George, and St. Betty, then we can never be obedient. We'll always make excuses. We'll let ourselves off the hook, so to speak. We'll lower the expectations of our own behavior and the behavior of those around us.

If there is any reason the church of Jesus Christ is not influential today, it is because we do not see ourselves as saints. And thus, we do not behave accordingly. And even worse, we sometimes forget to look at one another as people who are in communion with Christ who've been promoted by his work on the cross to the rank of saint.

There's a wonderful old book, *Everybody's Calvary*, by Alan Walker. William Barclay refers to it often when he writes about the Apostle's Creed or other works. In this book, there is a young minister who is preaching at a tiny village chapel. He invites the people to stay for communion. Now if you know anything about Scottish Presbyterians and the culture of the isles, you'll know that taking communion is a big deal. In fact most people don't celebrate communion the farther they get from Edinburgh. They don't feel worthy. This table is something that they haven't earned. Their lives don't correspond with its teachings. And so after this young minister offered this invitation to communion, he was surprised when most of the congregation that was gathered got up en masse and left. There were only two people who stayed. He was discouraged at such a small congregation. But there were two, and he was obliged, if you will, to go forward with the ancient rituals.

Yes, his spirit was dejected. Yes, the tone in his voice was dull. But as he began to recite the liturgy he came to the words, "with angel and archangel, with all the company of heaven, we worship and adore his glorious name." And he paused ... paused long enough for the Holy Spirit to grip his heart. Almost unconsciously he said out loud, "Angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven ... Oh God, forgive me. I did not know I was in that company."

It is well today to remind ourselves that heaven lies all about us. We are those who boldly say we have communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We are those who are cognitive, in touch, the power of heaven all around us—the transforming power to change our homes, our work places, our hearts. We have the fellowship of other members here, the body of Christ. Yes, it's an earthly fellowship. But it is inclusive of all those who have gone before and all those who come after us, all those gathered around the throne, and that is an amazing group to be included as part of. It is an amazing group to share company with. Yes, we believe.

Now listen closely. You're not going to hear this every Sunday, OK? We do believe that we have fellowship with those who have departed this life and are with God. And it's not a Halloween fellowship. It's a fellowship with the person who died on the cross for each of us. For the same spirit that made them saints, make you saintly also. Would that we would claim the truth—that we would live as those who have such a wonderful cloud of witnesses surrounding them. Everything and everyone in this room would be different. So accept Christ's invitation. In the next few moments allow yourself to be fed and nurtured and convinced. And if you are anything you are one of God's saints on this earth with a great mission and purpose.

So let us worship the Lord.