

Date: November 1, 2020 (All Saints' Day)

1. Texts: Revelation 7:9-17; Ps. 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: centrality of the Christian community.
4. Aim: instruct, challenge.
5. Proposition: "All the saints are to live in community."

## THE NECESSITY OF COMMUNITY

Of late I am being reminded consistently—almost constantly—of the centrality of community to the Christian faith. To be a disciple of Christ is to be a member of the Christian community that worships God in Spirit and in truth. One cannot be a Christian outside of or apart from the community of faith unless you are on a deserted island or in the middle of persecution. In Canada the likelihood that you might be an exception to the rule is minimal. Disciples of Jesus follow him from within the community of the faithful, from within the Church.

Sure, you can believe in God without being a part of the Church, but "believing in God" is not the same as being a Christian. The Christian has a life-changing relationship of faith with God as he revealed himself in Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. The process of transformation recreates the disciple in the image of Jesus and a necessary part of that image is belonging to the community of the faithful. After all, Jesus was baptized so that he could be part of the community and then summoned first 12, then 72 and then over a two hundred to follow him. St. Paul travelled throughout the Mediterranean creating congregations and writing a great deal about the "Body of Christ". St. Timothy was charged to take up his position of leadership within the Church. It is all very clear: the believer who is trying to live the faith on his or her own, without meaningful support from and involvement in the Church, is trying to be someone other than a disciple of Christ.

The "Sermon on the Mount" and particularly the Beatitudes are all about living in the new community of the followers of Jesus. The believers have entered this new experience of God through repentance, through that life-altering decision to change the course of action. In repentance the believer turns his or

her back on the ways of living contrary to God and embraces the new life in Jesus. This new life, lived in community, results in experiencing the blessings of God.

Those who acknowledge their need of God will find that need filled. Those who mourn will experience the support of the Holy Spirit. The meek will be seen as the embodiment of the Christ. Although living righteously will attract the animosity of society, that animosity will demonstrate the validity of your relationship with God. In showing mercy, you will become the recipients of mercy. With love as your motivation, you will see God at work in the world through the community. And as you live for and work towards peace, the world will see God at work through you. Such are the blessings of living in the new community of faith.

These are also the blessings that will flow from God through the Church to the outside world. The Beatitudes are an expression of the community of the faithful. It is from within this community that we experience such blessings and through this community that the world around us will experience them.

Our conversion to Christ makes us part of the community of the faithful, part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The initiation into the community occurs in baptism, administered with water in the name of the Trinity. Attachment to a denomination makes living in community practical and we Anglicans achieve this through confirmation.

Now we have to turn all this theory—which the community calls “theology”—into practice.

The disciple of Christ is made a member of the Church through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is not an option—it is the supernatural consequence of coming to genuine faith in Christ. Therefore, everyone who has experienced this transformational outpouring of the Spirit has to work out how to be part of the worshipping and ministering community of the faithful. Again, this is not an option. It is a requirement of the faith.

Now, since this sermon is written within an Anglican context, let's assume that it is within that context that we will work out our own salvation. To *be* a disciple of Jesus is to *live* within our worshipping and serving community. With this reality in front of us and within us, meeting together for worship on Sunday mornings is no longer one leisure or hobby-like activity. What that worship looks like will change as our contexts change. But worshipping with the Church is part of our identity, equal with being part of our biological family.

How frequently one does that has to be worked out. There are no hard and fast rules about *how* to do discipleship. We are only obligated to doing it.

Likewise with the issues of serving through the Church. The Body of Christ is obligated to express salvation and the love of God to outsiders in meaningful and practical ways. We are to love others just as Christ loved us, which is to say through sacrificial service. But the exact expression of this love is totally dependent on the context of the community. So, loving service to the world will be different in Toronto and in Peace River. It will be different in Grande Prairie and Colinton. The context of the Church determines the practical application of our salvation. *That* we must serve the world in love from within the community is not an option. *How* we do this is formed by our context.

The last step in this sermon is to explore what this will mean in terms of our proclamation of the gospel to others.

For the past 35 or more years, Christians have actively sought to diminish the standing of the institution called "The Church". And, when viewed only as an institution, the role, involvement and authority of the Church really do need to be diminished. But the Sermon on the Mount was not delivered to an institution. It was delivered to people who were being challenged to join the Body of Christ and the Family of God. It is from within the Church that one is to experience the blessings of God and the benefits of living in community.

The institutional aspects of the Church are only there to serve the worship and ministry of the disciples. When we invite someone to become a part of the Church, we are inviting them into relationships that will support their salvation

and their ministries of love to others. We will use the tools of the institution to facilitate such relationships.

So, it is to Christ that we owe allegiance and our relationship with him places us inside the community of the faithful. We will use our denominational attachments to facilitate the practical application of our salvation and Christ's demands to serve others.

This is the framework from which we can invite others into relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. We invite them, *not* to join our Church, but to join Christ which then makes them part of the Church. Attendance at Sunday worship is an obligation, but not because the institution commands it, but because the relationship with Christ requires it. Serving others in love is an obligation, because Christ himself did it.

The community of the faithful is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about—which is why it forms part of the lectionary for All Saints' Day. The saints we celebrate today are those people who not only understood this theology, but lived it out in practical terms day by day. They understood that they belonged to Christ and that meant that they belonged to the Church. They worked hard to figure out how to worship God in Spirit and in truth. They worked hard how to serve others in love through the Church. That's why we recognize them as saints.

May we, too, be so recognized by the next generation of disciples who walk in our footsteps.

AMEN.