“The Company We Keep”

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

The Celebration of the Communion of Saints

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Gene McAfee, Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. . . .” – Revelation 7:9

Every year around this time, when we celebrate the Communion of Saints, I’m reminded of a bit of judicial folklore told about Justice William J. Brennan when President Eisenhower appointed him to the Supreme Court. Judge Brennan said that he felt like a mule who had been entered in the Kentucky Derby. “I don’t expect to distinguish myself,” he said, “but I do hope to benefit from the association.”

Some of us may think of the Communion of Saints a bit like we think of the Supreme Court: the best of the best. The most distinguished. The standouts, the stars. But the biblical roots of the celebration of saints go deeper and spread broader than surface achievement.

Paul used the term “saint” about forty times in his letters. When he wrote to the Ephesian Christians, for example, he opened his letter with, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s clearly referring to ordinary, living, breathing Christians, using the terms “saints” and “the faithful” for the same people. They weren’t noteworthy for their piety or spiritual athleticism; they were known for being different, for having responded to the call of God by stepping away from the world’s ways of doing things and orienting their lives toward a reality deeper than most people attend to.

And that’s what the word “saint” means in the Bible—“set apart.” Saints are called “holy ones” in both testaments, and to be “holy” in the Bible is to be set apart **by** God **for** God. Different in a good way. Not like the others. Maybe even a little exotic. As our reading from 1 John puts it, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1). Family language in the Bible and today means belonging, relatedness, and similarity. To be a child of God means being more than simply homo sapiens; it means becoming aware, through the grace of God, of our relatedness **to** the divine and our call **from** the divine and then acting on that awareness. That package of call-and-response is saintliness.

One of my earliest encounters with the call-and-response of saintliness was the nun who taught me the Lord's Prayer. I was five years old, and Sister Whatever Her Name Was came to our house once a week to dress my mother's wound after mom's radical mastectomy for breast cancer. We were poor and the nun was a Sister of Charity. She walked to our house and stepped through our door in a cloud of black serge, with her face framed by her immaculate wimple.

But it was more than her appearance that impressed her memory on me. She was, to my young self, the very embodiment of kindness. She always greeted me in a soft but clear voice, knelt down to converse with me at eye level, and spent a minute or two asking how I was. She was taking me appropriately seriously. She was one of the first people outside my immediate family to give me a sense that I mattered.

Then she and mom would sit at the kitchen table while I watched television in the living room, and I would hear their voices as Sister changed the dressing on mom's wound. And when she was finished, mom would call me to join them so that Sister could say a prayer with us, concluding with what she called "the Our Father." And to this day, I remember Sister crossing herself while my Protestant mother and I remained with our heads respectfully bowed and our hands respectfully still.

That nun opened up for us the circle of care that makes up the communion of saints. I knew that she lived in a big house called a convent, but I had no idea then how her life had been shaped by years of parochial school, college, nursing school, and living intentionally as a professed religious. Those details will always remain a mystery to me, but I know now how profoundly her upbringing, teachers, professors, and religious sisters shaped her into a life of loving service. She brought them with her like a weather front when she entered our house on Columbia Street, and now I bring **their** influence on **her** and **her** influence on **me** to you.

Soon after I arrived here at FHC, one of you asked me if we might, from time to time, say the creed again. The answer is yes, even though I haven't gotten around to incorporating a creed into a service yet, so thank you for your patience.

Many of us think of creeds simply as lists of our beliefs, but the purpose of saying such lists out loud is not only to remind us of fundamentals of our Christian faith, but also to attach us to a community of believers. We express what we believe not just as individuals but also as members of the body of Christ, making the community an important part of our beliefs. We may not, as individuals, understand or agree with everything we say in the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, but the community that regularly gives voice to those words becomes part

of us when we join in and we become part of them. We are saying words that our ancestors spoke—and debated and doubted and struggled with and tried to live—and that communal speaking enlarges our frame of reference and deepens our sense of belonging.

We are not our own. We belong, first and always, completely and without exception, to God, "maker of heaven and earth" as the creeds say. We belong to one who is more capable than we are of seeing, knowing, and loving the world as it deserves to be seen, known, and loved; and our job is to align our wills with God's will, becoming co-creators with the loving presence at the center of creation.

Our lives are in God's hands, not ours and not anyone else's, in this life and in any life to come. That's what John envisioned for the global family of faith in the heavenly throne room, it's in the promise of our adoption as God's children, and it's the character of the community that Jesus called blessed.

One of my dirty little secrets is that I often watch reruns of "procedural dramas" – a.k.a. cop shows – and the other night on *FBI*, Agent Omar Zidan, the hunky American patriot of Egyptian ancestry, had to single-handedly stop a hijacked locomotive. The runaway engine was barreling down the tracks at 80

miles an hour, speeding toward disaster, and it was up to Omar, alone in the pilot's cabin, to put the brakes on. And he did, just yards from a catastrophe.

Whew, we all said, our forks suspended in midair. Omar did it again. He was the hero we've come to expect him to be in *FBI*. And no matter how much teamwork is necessary for the bad guys to be stopped, killed, or apprehended, there's always a hero in every episode—someone who displays exceptional courage, takes the risk, and saves the operation and usually many lives. We love our heroes.

And yes, saints are our heroes. They are the Oscar Romeros, the Dorothy Days, the Desmond Tutus, the Wendell Berrys, the Nelson Mandelas, the Martin Luther Kings, the Annie Dillards, the Mary Olivers, the Helen Prejeans, and so many others. They weren't perfect. Saints never are. But they were committed—committed to seeing God's world, loving God's world, and living in God's world as that beloved creation deserves.

And the seedbed of their commitment were the communities from which all of those saints emerged. None of those saints did it alone. They were all part of communities of various kinds of faith living out various kinds of missions—religious communities, civic communities, artistic communities, environmental communities, academic communities, professional communities.

Most of us don't keep the company of heroes. The company we keep is the company of those faithful saints—largely unsung, mostly unknown but to a few—who have lived their lives as best they could in communities of faith, the communities made up of the Joannes and the Jims and the Deedees and the Vans, the Earls and the Violas. I have my list—my cloud of witnesses, my communion of saints—and you have yours. Those communities are the ones that have shaped us and nurtured us, held us to the high standard of being our best self, and called us to leave the world better than we found it.

In a culture such as ours, so driven by media, it's easy to think that only extraordinary lives matter, even if those lives are largely media creations. But every now and then, even the most cynical among us recognize the importance of the quietly faithful, the truly authentic, and the mostly unsung. I want to close by telling you about an ordinary hero whose praises were belatedly sung.

I was blessed to be present at Harvard's 345th commencement ceremony on June 6th, 1996, when Miss Oseola McCarty was awarded a Doctor of Humane Letters degree by that institution. She was seated on the platform of the outdoor theater near Walter Annenberg, another honorary degree recipient that day, after whose family Annenberg Hall at Harvard is named. The contrast between those two honorees could not have been greater.

Oseola McCarty was born in Mississippi in 1908. After leaving school in the sixth grade to care for her aunt, she spent nearly her entire adult life working as a washerwoman. Not having had the opportunity to finish school or go to college herself and never having married or had children of her own, she decided that the best thing she could do with the life God had given her was to help others in need seeking to make a better life for themselves through education.

And so she donated a large portion of her life's savings—nearly $150,000—to establish a scholarship for students with financial need at the University of Southern Mississippi. She established that trust in 1995.

Her gift came to Harvard's attention soon after she made it, and on that June day in 1996, as the names of the great and the good, the wealthy and the powerful were read to a seated and respectful audience, Oseola McCarty sat almost invisible, swaddled in the doctoral cap and gown of the university.

When the University Marshal finished reading the citation for her honorary degree, which included noting her philanthropy, all 32,000 of us in the amphitheater rose spontaneously as a body with cheering, applause, and tears that exceeded everything else in that ceremony. No conquering hero was ever greeted with greater acclaim.

Every now and then, even when you least expect it, the Communion of Saints can hit you like a weather front. That's what we celebrate today.