

BLEST BE THE TIE
Philippians 2:1-11
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There are bonds of common humanity which are essential to our life. There is a way in which the love of God in Jesus Christ, energizes it, reveals it, calls it out of us, or – on occasion – reminds us how far we are from our own full humanity whenever it is absent.

Over the centuries the Christian church has called it by a funny name: The Communion of Saints. We nod in its direction on this Sunday of the church year, All Saints Day: we sing, or listen to, Ralph Vaughan Williams' great hymn, *For All the Saints*, and let it go at that. In the process, of course, we miss something the early Christian Church regarded as fundamental and central to the whole enterprise.

In the text this morning, Paul is writing to a group of people who had become very important to him – the church at Philippi. He told them of his gratitude for their support and prayer. It's obvious that he felt sustained by their love and he can't say enough about their kindness. In the process of all this affection Paul begins to isolate the essence of Christianity. Some would (and do) define it as right belief. Others regard it as a matter of moral behavior, duty. But emerging in the early writing of Paul is the acid test – the unity and love evident in the church itself. "Complete my joy," he pled; "have the same mind and love and be of one accord." And then some specifics: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

I have concluded that the Gospel of Jesus Christ confronts our culture as sharply in those several verses as anywhere else. I have concluded that Christian faith is absolutely revolutionary when it proposes as behavioral model – counting others better than oneself. The prevailing winds, after all, blow in the opposite direction. Self-assertion is fashionable, not self-abnegation.

I remember reading an article by Gerald Carr who was commander for the third and final Sky Lab mission and spent 84 days in space. Discussing the construction of space communities Carr observes, "Some major challenges will be to create closed ecological systems to sustain life aboard space stations and to develop a better understanding the complex interpersonal and human issues living in space will present. I expect that the sociological problems will prove to be more difficult to solve than the technological ones." (*The Futurist*, 1999)

Human relations experts have always known that, of course. Our technology is more precise, perhaps more advanced than our relational skills. The church may see itself as a Communion of Saints, metaphorically, at least, but the fact of the matter is that it's a jungle out there and St. Paul's advice notwithstanding, people who want to survive will concentrate of taking care of number one, developing self-sufficiency, learning so much self-esteem that self-assertion is simply the natural expression of one's inner self.

The cultural gospel is clear, however. Christopher Lasch called it the new Narcissism, and it is the very appealing and seductive doctrine Christians used to have the nerve to call sin. It is the

simple and unapologetic celebration of the self. The late Henri Nouwen called it “Nuclear Man” by which he meant the self-contained individual capable of standing alone indefinitely, needing no one.

We have discounted the richness of the whole area of human relationships in our age described broadly under the category of friendship. Instead human relationships are confined to three levels: romantic/sexual – it occupies our attention almost obsessively: from Hollywood, to Soap Operas; from best sellers to the eye catching headlines on supermarket counter tabloids, we do pay attention to romance and sex. It takes monumental self-discipline to keep your eyes on the loaf of bread.

And without any middle ground we proceed to functional relationships, business – that is to say. We learn how to manage, develop, plan, encourage, and squeeze utility out of the people with whom we deal. We attend seminars, workshops and buy an endless stream of books on the single topic of how to succeed in the business essentially by manipulating people.

Sex – business – and all the rest, say the relational experts, are relegated to the general category of acquaintances. We have, I was surprised to learn, between 500 and twenty-five hundred acquaintances.

What is conspicuous by its absence in this breakdown, of course, is friendship or anything that remotely resembles the Communion of Saints. Do you remember the movie *Four Seasons*. It was an account of friendship, as it lives and grows and changes in the relationship between three middle class, middle aged couples. It was a good movie. But the remarkable thing about it was that it touched a human dynamic, addressed an area which simply doesn't get much time elsewhere. Everyone who saw the movie seemed to realize it.

Ellen Goodman, for instance, was inspired by the movie to write a column about friendship. “Friends,” she wrote, “cook for each other, hold parties for each other's birthdays, promotions, pregnancies. We spend dozens of Saturday nights together and occasional weekends. Our children call us by first names: we are remembered when they say prayers or sell raffle tickets.”

“The movie,” she wrote, “made a pitch for trying to stay together despite the centrifugal forces.”

Those forces are real. One of them is the cultural Gospel of selfishness. Sometimes we actually believe that we don't need anyone: that we are better off standing alone, dependent on no one. Another is the obvious situation of flux and dislocation in which life has placed many of us. Someone once wrote that it wasn't long ago that you could “reach out and touch someone without calling them long distance. You saw your relatives weekly, ate Sunday dinner with them, spent Saturday night together. Neighbors lived cheek-by-jowl for several generations. When I go home to Pennsylvania I knock on the doors of my neighborhood and say hello to the neighbors whom I knew thirty-five years ago. I've lived in my present home for 7 ½ years and still haven't met the couple across the street.”

The centrifugal forces are strong. And perhaps the best way to observe All Saints Day is to acknowledge and celebrate the marvelous gift of friendship wherever you experience it, or to

take those initiatives which will create it. But there is more to it than celebrating the classic gift of friendship. The church, the early church, at least, saw itself, quite self-consciously, as the place where a new and richer and deeper level of human relationship would develop. The Christian Church, at its best, has known that its genius is something more than polite conviviality and cordiality. At its best it has discovered something like a Communion of Saints.

What a wonderful revelation that is for clergy who somehow get it in their heads that they are holding the church together on the sole strength of their brilliant theology, razor sharp exegesis and brave prophetic observation on the state of the world. What a revelation, finally, after several years in one's first parish to comprehend the immense power of the all-church picnic, soup and sweaters luncheon, Seekers, Prayer Shawl and prayer groups. What a major step in theological maturity it is to see the Communion of Saints emerging in the mundane affairs of "St. John's by-the-gas station."

We're inclined to forget that we are, essentially, fundamentally, a group of individuals who are related to one another in a new way because of Jesus Christ. We forget, that is to say, the horizontal dimension of the faith. At the center of Presbyterian worship is a way of communion which says, in its very form, that we belong to one another, and that our relationship with God has everything in the world to do with our relationship to one another.

Robert Raines caught the essence of this Christian secret in one of his early books entitled *Reshaping the Christian Life*. Raines wrote: "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other... We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers and sisters we may like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us and we to them. Because we are involved with Him we are involved with them. And the reverse is also true. Through them we move closer to Him. We might wish to avoid this horizontal belonging and cling only to Him. But we cannot do so. We belong to Christ only by belonging to one another."

The secret is that Jesus Christ is appropriated and interpreted and revealed to us through other people. We keep waiting for the mystical, ecstatic experience, the opening of the heavens and the literal descent of the Spirit, or at least a voice from the sky. But Jesus Christ will come through another person. It is in relationship: in kindness, thoughtfulness, loyalty, self-sacrifice, consideration that the reality of God will be known. That is the promise and the experience of the church.

And it is the discipline which commends itself to any person who wishes to grow and deepen in faith. We assume, almost naturally, that the pilgrimage involves traveling alone, into the inner spaces of the heart. We assume that growing in discipleship means reading the Bible and praying more. It does – but fundamentally what it means is reaching out, joining the company, taking a place in the Communion of Saints.

Disciplines of the spirit include praying but also listening to others, being available to people whose needs are self-evident; taking care of those God gives us and then extending that care to a wider circle. Spiritual discipline means private prayer but also opening the door of life to the stranger, the outcast, the rejected, the friendless. Spiritual growth is measured – not in hours spent in worship – but in lives loved, helped, healed, reconciled. "The grace of God," Karl Barth

wrote, “is that God encounters us as the listening God: God calls us not merely to the humility of the servant and the thankfulness of a child, but to the intimacy and boldness of a friend.” (*The Church in the Life of the Spirit*, p. 118)

The incarnation of God happened in the life of Jesus Christ. It happens also in the life of the world, when Christian people become a Communion of Saints, a community of people who unapologetically love, accept and trust one another.

That’s what we have to offer the world. It is also what God has to offer us. And if it happens at all, it will happen here – in the life, the activities, the mundane affairs of this particular Communion of Saints. “Blest be the tie that binds” and thanks be to God. Amen.