

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 119:57-64; Romans 8:18-27; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Sermon Title: *The Church, The Communion of Saints*

Prayer: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [our] heart[s] be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, [our] Rock and [our] Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

Salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2)

Text: The Word from God through which the Holy Spirit comes to stir our hearts for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost we reflect on the Apostles' Creed, the Third Article.

Introduction: Dear friends in Christ, in our second sermon on the Third Article of the Creed, we confess: *"I believe in . . . the holy Christian church, the communion of saints."* What does that mean? Simply put:

- The holy Christian church is the communion of saints.
- The communion of saints is the holy Christian church.

You see, the word *"church"* means *"a gathering, an assembly."* In other words, the holy Christian church is the gathering of people who have been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified by the Gospel through the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, what we as Christians confess in the Creed is that the holy Christian church is the gathering of God's saints in Christ around His Word and Sacraments. That is, believers in Jesus as Lord and Savior are the Church.

I. Pastor Martin Luther explains *"Church"* so simply and wonderfully in the Large Catechism:

"I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ [Ephesians 1:22]. This group is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with many different gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms [Ephesians 4:5-8, 11]. I am also a part and member of this same group, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses [Romans 8:17]. I am brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Spirit through having heard and continuing to hear God's Word [Galatians 3:1-2], which is the beginning of entering it. . . . So, until the Last Day, the Holy Spirit abides with the holy congregation or Christendom [John 14:17]. Through this congregation He brings us to Christ and He teaches and preaches to us the Word [John 14:26]. By the Word He works and promotes sanctification, causing this congregation daily to grow and to become strong in the faith and its fruit, which He produces [Galatians 5]." (Large Catechism, Part 2, Article III, 51-53).

Again, Luther's words: "*A little holy group and congregation of pure saints.*" That is the holy Christian church, the communion of saints. But:

- Just how "*saintly*" are you?
- Just how "*saintly*" are we as a congregation of the holy Christian church, the communion of saints?

In consideration of those questions:

- Maybe it's best not to ask ourselves for fear we wouldn't get a completely unbiased answer.
- Maybe ask others outside this gathering how they see you as a member of the holy Christian church?
- Perhaps ask others outside this fellowship how they see St. James Lutheran Church/St. Paul's Lutheran Church?
- Do you and I as individuals and do we as a congregation of Christ's Church on earth always appear very saintly to others?
- Do we always look, speak, and act like "*a little holy group and congregation of pure saints*"?

If we're honest with ourselves, no, not always. Why don't we always "*walk the walk and talk the talk*" as Christians?

- In this earthly life, the consequences of our sinful nature and our sins still remain.
- The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh are always working to lead us into sin and disobedience to God's Word so that we fail to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.
- And, we don't always show love and mercy to other people.

Yet:

- The Holy Spirit *has* called us by the Gospel to saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- By water and Word in Baptism, you and I have been given the forgiveness of all our sins.
- We are rescued from death and the devil and are gifted eternal salvation from sin, Satan, and death.

For in Christ by grace through faith, you are a new creation with a new spiritual life and nature created in you by the Holy Spirit through Baptism's washing and rebirth (Titus 3:5). *What does this mean?* This means that you are a saint, a holy person.

You see, sinners one and all, the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified you in Baptism by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for you making you a saint, a holy person in Christ. The Spirit did this as He brought you saving faith through the Gospel of Christ. That saving faith receives and holds on to the gift of the forgiveness of sins which the Gospel delivers to you personally in Word, Baptism, and Supper.

And where is it that God the Holy Spirit delivers to you these gifts of Jesus the Savior? In this holy Christian Church of which you are a part and member. Luther summarizes as follows:

“In this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the holy Sacraments and Absolution [Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; John 20:23] and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel” (Large Catechism, Part 2, Article III, 54).

Therefore, it is in the gathering of people around the Word and Sacraments of Christ that the Holy Spirit delivers to you the gifts of the promises of God. So, if you want to know where the holy Christian church is, look for the *communion of saints* gathered where the Word of the Gospel is purely preached, and the Sacraments of Christ are administered according to His institution.

By these *means of grace*, there you can be sure is the *“little holy group and congregation of pure saints”* receiving what Jesus the Savior purchased and won for all people with His sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection from the dead – forgiveness of sins! That’s what the gathered sinner-saints of God in Christ, called the Church, is all about.

Luther puts it this way, as follows from the Large Catechism:

“Everything . . . in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the <grace of the> Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but <continuous, uninterrupted> forgiveness of sin. This is because God forgives us and because we forgive, bear with, and help one another [Galatians 6:1–2].” (Large Catechism, Part 2, Article III, 55).

Simply, that is our life together in the holy Christian church as the communion of saints. We read in Ephesians 4:

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Therefore, as the Church:

- We continually pray for all our fellow Christians and work with them wherever possible to alleviate human suffering.
- We seek to prevent and to heal sinful divisions between Christians and between church bodies that result from human opinions, economic status, race, ethnicity, and so on.
- By the power of the Holy Spirit, we live in forgiveness with everyone around us, readily forgiving those who sin against us, especially those in our family and church, and quickly asking forgiveness of others.
- And we regularly gather together to receive the Word and Sacraments with their gifts of forgiveness, life, salvation, and the strengthening of our faith within the community of believers as the communion of saints in this place.

That's why we confess from the Small Catechism:

“The Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers” (Small Catechism – *Explanation to the Third Article*).

Thanks be to God:

- That's what God does for you here in this place, at this font, pulpit, and altar.
- That's what God does for you in this place gathered together with your fellow saints, brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Indeed, through Gospel and Sacrament, the Spirit begins and daily increases holiness in you through the Christian Church and the forgiveness of sins.

Conclusion: Therefore, dear friends in Christ, by the power of God the Holy Spirit, continue to be the saints you have been called and gathered to be in Jesus. So, that you may continue to receive with great joy in the Church the forgiveness of sins won for you by Christ, our Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To God alone the Glory!