

Communion of Saints—Love, Forgiveness, and Freedom

From the Eastertide series on the Apostles' Creed: *Credo*

Text: Genesis 21:9; I John 4:12, 18; Matthew 20:25-26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"... Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian playing with her son Isaac..." Genesis 21:9

"... if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." I John 4:12

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear..." I John 4:18

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." Matthew 20:25-26

As someone has said, the art of life is to cooperate with the inevitable ... and so let us talk about mothers. Mother's Day is not a holy feast day in the calendar of the Christian church, but it has become rock solid in the culture of our society. And as a matter of fact, it gives us a good occasion to honor our mothers, something that we have all had, and if we have had it well, then there's no praise too high.

Mother's Day at Christ Community gives us an occasion to focus a bit more broadly, and to think about the family, and to recognize the critical importance of the family not only for the nurture of individuals but for the wellbeing of society itself. And so on this beautiful Lord's day in Eastertide our focus is on the family, and to offer "Oh, Hail" to our mothers. It is right and proper so to do.

There are a couple of qualifications I think that are always important to make on a day like this. For though Mother's Day can be a beautiful day with much to commend it, it is not an unmixed blessing. While it is a beautiful experience for so many, it is also an occasion for some sadness and pain for others, those who perhaps longed to find fulfillment in that role but were denied it, or those who feel that it was not fulfilled with all of its potential. There can be so much hurt and pain in human relationships. And so a day like this is a day to honor, to give thanks, to recognize, but also a day in which we are sensitive to the fact that within the human community there is also brokenness and pain.

A second qualification is this: As we celebrate it here at Christ Community we talk about the festival of the Christian home. And that's right and proper too, for we

are Christians and therefore we think of the home and the family in the context of our Christian tradition. But we ought not think of it as though all of the wonderful potential about the family is uniquely Christian. There are other cultures, and other societies, and other religious faiths that also have wonderful values of family. And so when I speak of the Christian family or the Christian home I want to acknowledge that what we're talking about is something that is a broader human phenomenon.

The best context perhaps then in which to talk about interpersonal relationships, community, family, human bonding, human ties is maybe to borrow an article of faith from the Apostle's Creed, which we have been considering in the season of Eastertide. "I believe in the communion of saints," states the Creed. The "communion of saints." That's another designation for the church, and it's really perhaps the best and the broadest understanding of what we really want to talk about when we talk about family, to talk about the relationships that bind us together in communion, in community, the community of the saints, for a really Christian community is a community that is far more complex than simply the nuclear family.

There is a lot in the press of the religious right that talks about family values and about the disintegration of the family. And certainly the family is a concern to us all. But we ought not to make an idol of the nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and child. Scott Peck, the psychologist writer, says certainly no one would argue that the finest situation in which to nurture a child is with a father, and a mother, and a stable home setting, and yet that is not the only setting in which there can be genuine family. So I suppose that we could say to Dan Quayle yes, you certainly have a point, but Murphy Brown has a point too. (In a presidential campaign, Dan Quayle, incumbent Vice-President, derided the television character, Murphy Brown, for choosing single parenthood.)

I think it's important for us in the Christian community to affirm the family and marriage, and affirm that context for the nurture of children, but to avoid any self-righteousness or any arrogance, and to recognize that by the grace of God, human community is possible in a variety of forms, and that the grace of God and the love of God are operative in a diversity of circumstances. So if we talk about the communion of the saints we can be inclusive of the broader context. We think about those interpersonal relationships that bond us together with another and with a community, a bonding that transcends biology and bloodlines, though we value those and give God thanks for those.

The communion of the saints is a creation of the Holy Spirit. Talk of "the communion of the saints" comes in the third section of the Apostles' Creed. And the third section of the creed begins: I believe in the Holy Spirit. Human community is not a human possibility. Human community is a miracle. Human community is a gift. Human community is a gift of the grace of God effected by

the Spirit of God. Human community is a living together in love, and love is of God.

I love the first letter of John I in the fourth chapter. For there so simply and so clearly it is stated that God is love. And further, that we love because God first loved us, and that when we love one another we experience the love of God. The love of God is not some abstract idea, nor is the love of God some mystical, emotional, spiritual, out-of-the-body experience. The love of God is as radically concrete as our love for another human being. That is really quite an amazing claim.

I think, in the church, I can still hear being preached the sermons of all of my childhood, and my youth, and probably much of my own early ministry where we talked about the love of God as something that was given to us and that was obligatory on our part to give back to God. Those sermons stressed (still stress) something that was a purely vertical kind of thing, an individual kind of experience. But for the life of me, the older I grow, the more I experience, the more I fail to know how to love God, in this way.

I'm really helped when I read this passage from John where he says, don't go looking for it. Love your brother or your sister. Love that significant other in your life and in that human relationship where love abounds, there God dwells. The one who abides in love, abides in God, and God abides in that one so that human community is not a human possibility. It is the creation of the spirit of God who ushers us into the love of God to be experienced as we love one another.

There is a statement in this context where John says, If God so loved us ..." Now how would you finish that sentence, if God so loved us ... ? Well, again I'm thinking in terms of all of my Christian nurture and training and early experience, I would finish that sentence this way: If God so loved us, then we ought also to love God, right? No, not according to John. If God loved us then we ought also to love one another.

That vertical love becomes experienced and expressed in our horizontal human relationships. So the communion of the Holy Spirit in the Apostle's Creed follows the article "I believe in the Holy Spirit." For human community is not a human possibility. It's a miracle. It's a gift. It's a grace. It's grounded in God who is love. I don't need to go searching for the experience of God. It is as close to me as you are. In the concreteness of human loving relationships is the possibility of experiencing the reality of the presence of God in our lives. The love of God is not other than our love one for another.

You read through that fourth chapter in John I, once again. Human love, divine love, God's love for us, our love for God, our love for one another, they are all intertwined. John's very blunt. He doesn't pull any punches. He says, "You tell me, you love God and hate your brother or sister?" Then he says a hard word. He says, "You're a liar." Because, says John, it's simply not possible to be in love with

God and to be out of love with our brothers and sisters. And he is not speaking of simply biological brothers and sisters.

I called my dear aunt, whom I call every Saturday night, and I wished her a happy Mother's Day. She is eighty-two, never been married, no children, yet she is the matriarchal center of our Rhem clan. She is the warm heart and center. She is the pulse beat. She cared for her parents into their old age until she buried them. She continued to care for two sisters who were invalids until she buried them. And she came night after night, weekend after weekend, to my parents to nurture them until she buried, we buried my mother. And then she moved in and took care of my father until we buried him. She has nieces and nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews, grand-grand nieces and nephews, and we all know there is no more giving, loving, caring, nurturing, family-centered, family-rooted, person than Aunt Florence who has never married. Last night, we had a nice chat about that. She said, "Dick, I've not missed anything." I said, "Of course, you haven't because you've given everything."

Salomee was a Jewish mother. Out of the Jewish community come wonderful stories about Jewish mothers. Like "How many children does it take to change a light bulb for a Jewish mother?" None. Because she just says, "It's O.K. I'll just sit here in the dark." But Salomee, the mother of the disciples James and John, had ambitions for them. She knew there were twelve disciples, but she thought positions one and two were not too much for her sons. After all, weren't they cousins of Jesus? Wasn't there a little special break here or a privilege? Couldn't she cut to the front of the line? "Oh, Lord when you come into your kingdom may my boys be number one and number two?" she asks. Jesus said, "That's not mine to give."

James and John, or Salomee, wherever the blame might lie, were wrongly ambitious. What she asked for angered the other disciples. The other ten would just as soon have been one or two as well, and so they were really only angry because James and John had an ambassador to make their appeal. The resentment and the anger and the tension within that disciple band is evidence of what happens when human community is not grounded in humility and service.

And look at the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. This is the first family of faith, isn't it? Did not God start out with the whole human race and for eleven chapters of Genesis saw the continual failure to live up to the calling, so in the eleventh of Genesis, God says, "I will start over. There will be a resurrection, new life. We'll start with barrenness of Sarah's womb and start something new. We'll start with one family in order, eventually, to reach all families of the earth."

Remember the story? Abraham and Sarah go out. "And I'll make your family as many as the stars of the heavens and the sands of the sea." But Abraham and Sarah were growing older and becoming less confident of the promise of God. And so Sarah, thinking to take things in her own hands, said, "Here take Hagar,

my slave girl from Egypt and begin the new line with a child from her womb." Which Abraham did. And Hagar conceived.

And, now you have a situation so characteristic of the human situation. Hagar, full of Abraham's child, looks at Sarah with contempt. But can't you understand? The slave girl had the chance to look down her nose, just a little bit, at Sarah the barren one. And Sarah, of course, responding in kind, treated Hagar harshly.

Hagar flees out into the wilderness. She is ready to die when the angel of the Lord says, "Hagar, rise up. Go back. Submit. I will make of the child you are carrying a great nation." Hagar goes back. She has the child. Abraham says to the Lord, "How about Ishmael. Will Ishmael do?" God says, "No, it's going to be from the seed of you and Sarah." And so eventually, doddering old fool that he was, at a hundred, Sarah at ninety, to them is born Isaac, a name that means laughter. What a joke.

Then one day, little Isaac and Ishmael are playing in the back yard. Sarah suddenly thinks, "Ishmael just might cut in on my Isaac's promised blessing." No way. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is distressed because he loves Ishmael as he loves Isaac.

Do you feel the threat that Sarah felt? Do you sense perhaps that she was retaliating now for the contempt for which Hagar had held earlier? Do you see how fraught and fragile we are, how human relationships so easily sour, how hate creeps in and brokenness becomes the order of the day?

In deep distress Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away into the wilderness which, to do so, meant to send them both to their death. But again there is the intervention of the Lord. Hagar has set the child a bit away from her, so as not to watch the child die of thirst and starvation. An angel of the Lord hears the cry of the child and says to Hagar, "Rise up. Hold the child in your arms." Hagar opens the eyes she has closed to shut out the horror of what is happening. She sees a well! And the promise of before is reiterated to her: This child shall become a great nation. (Which, by the way, is the Arabic Nation, it is believed.)

What human drama! Aren't we fragile with all of our insecurities, our jealousies, our proud ambitions, our wounded egos, the anger, and the resentment, and the hostilities? Friends, we're talking about the first family of faith! Is it any wonder that the covenant into which God entered with this family and through this family, all of us, is called a covenant of grace? Is there any hope, apart from grace? Is there any community possible apart from miracle? Not with the likes of Salomee, James and John. Not with the likes of Abraham and Sarah. Not with the likes of you and me.

I couldn't help but think about it when one of Isaac's children went in with a machine gun and massacred Ishmael's children. Jews and Christians claimed Abraham through Isaac, but the Muslim world claims Abraham through Ishmael.

I thought to myself, well, what might have happened if, in the first family of faith somehow or other, there could have been more love and forgiveness. What if Sarah could have forgiven Hagar, understanding that within Sarah too were the same kinds of feelings and emotions that caused Hagar to break community? And what if Hagar could have forgiven Sarah and understood her sense of threat and her insecurity? And what if there could have been reconciliation in the first family of faith maybe, what, thirty-five hundred years ago, thirty-five, thirty-seven hundred years ago?

We're talking about the dynamics, the brokenness within the family millennia ago that still manifests itself in the horror of the Hebron massacre, when Isaac's child shoots Ishmael's children, and Ishmael's children retaliate by blowing up cars with bombs in the midst of Isaac's children.

For some decades our world was poised on the brink of disaster through great ideological confrontation between east and west, and then suddenly that confrontation broke down. There was much rejoicing. And then underneath we see simmering, breaking out now in terrible violence and bloodshed and human pain. Bosnia and Herzegovina, and all the places in the world where there are ancient blood feuds, tribal feuds, and ethnic hostility. Dear God. Do you see what I mean? Human community is not a human possibility. It is the creation of the spirit of God by the grace of God.

Is there anything we can do? There is something. I've got to start with me. You've got to start with you. Sounds like a rather meager beginning when you're thinking about a world being torn apart and bleeding. But I've got to start with me. I've got to recognize how my ego gets crushed and what I do in response. I've got to recognize that terrible need within me to be right and repent of it. I've got to recognize my tendency to be right by making you wrong. I've got to recognize that I tend to be loving and giving to you as long as it can be through the patronage of one in the superior position. I've got to recognize my pride, my jealousy, my insecurities that cause me to do the things that I despise, and I have to hear the gospel, that God is love and God loves me. And because God loves me, if it could ever get through to me, I could love. We could love. And God forgives us, and so we can forgive. And in that forgiveness we can find freedom, and we can set others free... In cooperation with the grace of God we can be part of a miracle in the making.

What are the things that you ought to be letting go of this morning? What kind of baggage are you hauling around at the great expenditure of energy and emotional strength? What are you harboring? What are you holding onto? What continues to fester? What do you have to let go of? Today, here and now, by the miracle of grace, your life could be changed. That's the promise of the gospel. That's the possibility of the spirit of God. That's the foundation of the communion of the saints. People with all the stuff that we carry, flawed and fragile that we are, will you hear me? God loves you, and in that love we can love one another.