

Pako Evening Service: 25/09/2016

Scripture Readings: Eph 4:1-16; John 15:1-17; Sermon: "Common union of saints"

Congregation, one senior member of the congregation said to me last week, that one of the highlights of his for the week is to attend worship. In fact, he said more than that, he actually said that attending the evening services one of the best ways to finish the first day of the week. What this guy was saying had nothing to do with having a second service on a Sunday, but that he really enjoyed the fellowship of the saints, for we have this common union, namely Jesus Christ! Now I wish to emphasise that a little, for some people have all sorts of ideas about what the common union of saints is all about. One Christian suggested that the communion of saints is about the marks of the true church.

They love quoting Art 29 of the Belgic Confession. A true church faithfully proclaims the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, faithfully administers the sacraments, and finally, faithfully and lovingly exercises discipline. Now as much as I appreciate Art 29, it's not the centre of our common union. Others have said it is our four forms of unity and the three ecumenical creeds that give us common union. Well it is true that our confessions and creeds give expression to that union, but it is Jesus Christ who binds us together.

The centre of our common union is Jesus Christ. Or if you will, the true church is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour and that is why we have the line in the Apostles' creed that says, "I believe in the communion of saints." One young Christian man was visiting a church where his girl friend at the time worshipped. Since the church there were to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the coming week, he took the time to ring the elders to see if he could attend.

The elders came and visited him and asked him all sorts of questions about the creeds and the confessions and the worship practices in his home church, which this man answered to the best of his ability. After the elders had asked their questions, to be polite, they asked whether he had any questions for them. And the young man thought for a moment and asked, "You haven't asked whether Jesus is my Saviour and Lord? Why would you not ask that question or even start with that question?" The elders were embarrassed and learnt a valuable lesson from this young man.

It was Jesus Christ who brought the church into existence through his death and resurrection. That is what we have in common and that is why together we are the communion of saints. Where not a communion of golfers, or Cat supporters, we are a communion of saints, bought by the broken body and precious blood of Christ. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, and the gift of faith, we share wonderful blessings.

For instance, we are now holy in God's sight. We are now regarded saints. Christ's righteousness has been imputed onto us. What a blessing. And another blessing is that we have his Holy Spirit living in us, creating within us a desire to separate ourselves from the sin that is all around us and still clings to us. More than that, the Holy Spirit creates in us a desire to know God and His love to us in Christ better and better so that we may become more and more Christ like.

There are also responsibilities that come with knowing Jesus Christ as your Saviour. For Christ calls no one without being recruited into his army. We are all part of the living body, each member playing a part and contributing to the welfare of the body. And if we cut ourselves off from the body, we harm the body and we may even die spiritually. I was speaking to a colleague this week who was somewhat discouraged because a young couple that he had put quite some work into had come to him and told him that they wanted to worship elsewhere. They felt they needed a change.

They told him that it had nothing to do with him, they loved him as a pastor and he had been a great encouragement to them, but they felt as though they needed a change. And when the minister asked them where they would be worshipping, they didn't know. They were going to try some different fellowships. Congregation, let me tell you that I really felt for this guy. It's happened to us as a ministry couple and I tell you that in many ways it is worse than a funeral. They don't want to be part of the body that is endeavouring to be faithful. They no longer wish to be part of this communion of saints!

What's more, often the searching ends up being nothing more than an excuse for becoming a Christian without the communion of saints and without accountability. It's actually quite a dangerous game. They don't realize that being on their own as Christians can be difficult. It's a little like the bowl full of hot coals. You take one out and it

quickly cools off. Scripture teaches that if you truly believe in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord, then you are no longer dead people walking about aimlessly, but have been quickened to life through God's word and Spirit. And part of that is becoming a valued member the communion of saints.

Now it needs to be said, that you cannot be a true part of the communion of saints if you do not have Christ as your Saviour! Romans 8:9 makes the point clear, "...And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." In direct contrast, 1 John 4:13 tells us, "We know that we live in him and he is us, because he has given us of His Spirit."

Sometimes people don't understand the wonderful blessing it is to be part of the communion of saints. For starters, we all share in equal participation in all the promises of Christ and his gospel. The same reconciliation, redemption, justification, sanctification, life and salvation, belong to all the saints by and for the sake of Christ. We have in common all the benefits that are necessary for our salvation. Oh, almost missed one, and our glorification. Eph 4:4-5 makes that clear, "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism"

We also share in all Christ's benefits including the wide variety of gifts that are given to each member for the salvation and edification of the church. One of the greatest benefits, the greatest treasure if you like, is to know Him and the gift of eternal life. A second benefit is having his Holy Spirit, testifying to our spirits that we are God's children, reminding us that we are eternally safe in his arms.

And at the very least, we also share three gifts in common. The gift of faith, hope and love. One could not be a member of the one holy universal Church without at least some measure of these gifts. Faith needs to be fed, and although we do that personally and as individuals and as families, there is something special about being fed together as we come under God's word together. It is by faith we have received Jesus as Saviour. Without faith we cannot know Jesus as our Saviour.

Hope needs to be quickened. With the gift of hope we look forward to meeting our glorious Saviour. It is not just a faint hope, (I hope so), but a sure confidence that one day we will be with our Saviour face to face. And thirdly, love needs to be deepened. It's our greatest possession, the greatest gift. If we do not love, then we have no part in Christ, and the communion of the saints falls apart.

We can have doctrines right, and teaching right, and even be able to quote chapter and verse in Scripture, but if we have no love we are nothing. No more than a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal, for God is love! Of course there are more gifts and the Spirit divides these amongst the members. These gifts are not given to promote self. Each one of us is to serve the other with our gifts. It's not an option, or nice, but it's our duty, and we are to do it cheerfully. Another's laughter is our reason for joy; another's sorrow costs us tears.

These different gifts are given to various people for the encouragement and salvation of the whole body. They are given so that the elect may be gathered in. They are given for the work of ministry. They are given for the edification of the church.

Now we don't all have the same gifts. But Christ has so distributed the gifts on the church, that through their proper exercise, his kingdom will grow and the church will be edified. Eph 4:7 puts it like this, "But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." In 1 Cor 12:12ff, Paul speaks about the body and its various parts. And the gist of what Paul is saying there is that our obligation as members is to devote all the gifts which have been conferred upon them to the glory of Christ, our Head, and to the salvation and encouragement of every member mutually.

Now one other thing before I close. If the communion of saints means anything and if it is going to last, we also believe in 'the forgiveness of sins.' We need that for the communion of saints are still a communion of sinners. We need to be able to show forgiveness. To be able to forgive is the bottom line of all church talk and action. Scripture doesn't ask us to forget, but to forgive. And by the way, that may take some time. If we have been deeply hurt, don't expect people to forgive instantly. That would be a wrong expectation.

We believe in the unity, holiness and universalism of the church. And yet so often it is fragmented, painfully torn, hurting. And sometimes the root of bitterness remains close to the surface. Yet, even then, it is so good to be able to say, "We also believe in the forgiveness of sins!"

And sometimes, even though we do our very best not to sin and harm each other, the ability to do so escapes us. Sometimes we seem to do each other harm instead of good. Sin is never far away! That's not just true within our families, but also within the communion of saints. A careless action or thoughtless word can hurt others or me! So I make it my confession, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." I love the church of Jesus Christ and its members but sometimes I still unintentionally hurt them.

A careless action or thoughtless word, or an insensitive meditation can hurt. So I too confess, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." And we know that God forgives, not in the first place because we have confessed, repented and believed, although that is essential. It's not even because we are now doing better, although that is an indispensable result. No, God forgives our sins because of Jesus' atonement.

At one moment in history Jesus shed his blood for me, for us. Because of that alone, God forgives my sins and my sinful nature. So may we not use our sinful natures as an excuse for our sin. Don't say, "Too bad, that's the way I am." Rather, because of what Christ has done, we must constantly struggle against sin and our sinful nature until our forgiveness is complete, when Jesus takes us into his presence.

Thankfully, I also know that when I truly confess and repent, convicted by the Holy Spirit of my sin, and now clothed in the righteousness of Christ, God throws my sin into the depths of the sea and remembers them no more! "No fishing!" And that forgiveness that I have experienced, or as Romans 8:1 reminds us, no condemnation, is how I must forgive my loved ones, and my fellow saints. How often, how far? Seven times seventy or as far as the east is from the west! That dear friend gives freedom.

Free from the burden of unforgiven sin. Free from the thought of God's judgment. Free to serve my Saviour and King forever. Wow, free at last and forever! When you think about it positively, the church lives by forgiveness. Negatively, without forgiveness, we destroy each other. Oh I know it is not always easy to forgive and sometimes the hurt and pain and consequences runs deep and the Lord knows that too. And sometimes it may take years to forgive.

Yet to be able to forgive is the healing balm and one of the greatest blessings we can receive and give. Doesn't mean we have to forget, but Jesus asks us to forgive, just as he forgave us. To the saints the Christian Reformed Church of Geelong, may we increasingly become the communion of saints that Jesus died and lives for us to be! Indeed, may our Father in heaven be glorified by the way the communion of saints behave, love and forgive here on earth. Amen.