

“the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins . . .”

*Psalm 103:1-5 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.  
<sup>2</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—  
<sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,  
<sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
<sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good as long as you live  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.

*2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (NRSV)*

<sup>5</sup>But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent—not to exaggerate it—to all of you. <sup>6</sup>This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; <sup>7</sup>so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup>So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup>I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup>Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. <sup>11</sup>And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

*We continue in our affirmations about the people of God, a fellowship of forgiven sinners that has been created by the Holy Spirit.*

As short as the Apostles’ Creed is, there are some phrases that I’m sure many of us say with little clue about what it really means for us. One is surely “the communion of saints.” So let’s take a careful look at both of these important words.

*Communion?*

Communion translates the Greek word, *koinonia*. It is also translated “fellowship.” *Koinonia* was a common Greek word, used to talk about marriage, business partnerships, politics – anywhere that people shared resources and experiences. Similarly, many Methodist churches have a room that is designated the fellowship hall. It is easy to think that fellowship is merely a warm-hearted brotherly and sisterly love. Fellowship is certainly that – but also far more. That “far more” is what we are trying to get at with the biblical idea of communion, of *koinonia*.

The best way to understand *koinonia* is to see it as “sharing in” something. At Pentecost, Jesus’ followers shared in the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit, as do all Christians (2 Corinthians 13:13). Indeed, the *koinonia*, the communion, of the believers was a gift brought by the Spirit. But we also share in the Spirit, just as God has called us all to the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus, which the apostle John makes clear in a letter to believers.

John writes: “we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship [*koinonia*/communion] with us; and truly our fellowship

[*koinonia*/communion] is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1:3-4).

Why does John want us to grasp the truth of Jesus? First, so that like the community in Jerusalem, we might have fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another (the horizontal). Second that we might have *koinonia* with the “Father and his son Jesus Christ” (the vertical). And thirdly, so that our “joy may be complete.”

#### “Sin” and “sins”

It is important to differentiate between “sin” and “sins.”

By “sin,” the Bible means a tragic flaw or deformity that is shared by all humans. It is something with which we all are born. It is like a beast that is always lurking, ready to consume and destroy. In my classes, I often use the metaphor of a flaw in our moral DNA. It is just there and we all have it – from birth. From this flaw, from sin, springs the destruction wrought by pride, greed, jealousy, hatred, and the rest.

Where did we get this flaw? It has been with humanity almost from our beginning, when our earliest ancestors chose against God rather than for God, desiring to be like gods themselves. This is the tragic story of Adam and Eve.

But the worst consequence of all is that sin separates us from God. Adam hid from God after he rebelled against God. The biblical story is the long story of a gracious God determined to restore the relationship that we wrecked.

“A sin” or “sins” are specific transgressions of God’s law, which boils down to loving God and loving neighbor. Thus, it is sin that drives us to gossip about others, and it is a sin when we do so.

This may all seem a bit pedantic, but your Bible reading will be easier if you can differentiate between the beast called “sin” that lurks within us all and the specific sins that we commit.

Has everyone sinned? Yes. No one loves God and neighbor fully at all times. Hence, our need for God’s loving, gracious, forgiveness.

#### Saints?

Who are the saints who share this fellowship, who participate in this blessed communion. The saints are all believers, those living now, those have died, and even those who have yet to be born. The “communion of saints” is the Spirit-filled fellowship of all those who have ever had or ever will have faith in Jesus Christ.

“All believers” is the meaning of “saints” whenever you come across it in the New Testament. Only later did the word come to be used for certain distinctive Christians as designated by the Roman Catholic Church.

#### Forgiven

It is one thing to say the words, “I am forgiven.” It is another thing entirely to take it to heart. We have enough trouble forgiving ourselves or those we love the most. The idea that we will one day stand before God as a forgiven people, as a forgiven person – well, it is almost too much to comprehend. The great hymn, “Amazing Grace,” is aptly named. It is amazing, even shocking. In class after class that I teach, people ask me whether forgiveness is available to the most horrid monster they can imagine, such as Hitler or John Gacy. No matter how many times we answer the question, “yes,” as we should, it still shocks us, even scandalizes us. Could this really be?

First, ask yourself what needs forgiving. You’ll find that it is all the ways in which we have failed to love God and to love one another. “Sins” is the word we often use to describe all those ways. Here is a useful definition of sin: *sin is whatever separates us from God*. Think of sin as a large chasm. God stands on one side of the chasm and we stand on the other side. It wasn’t always this way. God once came in the evenings to walk with Adam and Eve, but that ended with their sin. They were separated from God; we are separated from God. Thus, the obvious question is how we cross the chasm to God. The short answer is that we can’t cross the chasm by our own efforts. Rather, the chasm has been closed by God, through his faithfulness to his covenant, through Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to the cross. It is God who has come to us. And it is by God’s

grace<sup>1</sup> and grace alone that we have been forgiven. In some mysterious way, never fully articulated in the New Testament, we have been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus on the cross. We have been redeemed. We have been made right with God. We have been justified. We have been forgiven. We have been saved. The chasm has been closed.

### The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
the third day he rose from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth at the right hand of God  
the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge  
the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The next obvious question is this -- for whom has the chasm been closed? Who has been made right with God? It is the people of God who are a forgiven people, who have been redeemed. And how would we know who those people are? The people of God are those who have faith in Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul put it, the "badge of membership" in the people of God was once circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, the avoidance of pork and so on. But now, with Jesus' death and resurrection the "badge of membership" in the people of God is simply faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-31).

This question quickly follows: But what about all those people who don't come to faith in Christ or have never even heard of him? Frankly, I'm glad that all this is

ultimately in God's job description, not mine! Again we come back to the key question: will we trust God? Are we really willing to rely on God's goodness, love, wisdom, mercy, and justice? I am. Do I hold out the hope that God's grace extends past the grave, that people might have the opportunity to come to faith in Christ after death? I do, for I can find nothing in Scripture that prevents me from genuinely holding to such hope. . . . but in the end, I trust God.

### *Forgiving*

The forgiven are to be forgiving. It is like breathing – in and out. We are to breathe out the very forgiveness that we have breathed in. Today's passage from 2 Corinthians is a good example.

The apostle Paul was in the business of founding communities of new Christians. We can easily imagine (or can we?) the problems and difficulties that must have arisen. There is a man in Corinth who must have done something terrible and was, in essence, kicked out of the Christian community. Paul was known to urge this from time to time when someone posed so big a threat that the community's existence was in doubt. We don't know much about the circumstances, only what we can infer from the letter. But what is clear is that Paul is telling the community that the time has come to bring the man back in, to forgive and to console him.

This has nothing to do with whether the man deserves the forgiveness. There is nothing said about his repentance or about a change in ways. Paul simply says it is time to forgive. Forgiveness in the New Testament "is a term whose understanding is grounded in God's giving freely and graciously to people who do not deserve it. . . . [In a community] the term functions to describe the restoration of relationships between

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<sup>1</sup>I still like the "old-fashioned" definition of grace. God's grace is God's unmerited favor. If we merited (deserved) forgiveness, it wouldn't be grace. If we earned it, it isn't grace. Grace can neither be deserved nor merited or, by definition, it isn't grace.

or among people.”<sup>2</sup> Grace and forgiveness are bound together. Indeed, sometimes in the NT, the word translated as “forgive” (including in today’s passage from 2 Corinthians) is actually a derivation from the Greek, *charis*, meaning “grace” or “gift.”

Yet how hard it can be for us to offer this grace, this forgiveness, to others, even to those we love. Instead, we harbor our hurts and slights. How many spouses have not said to themselves at one time or another, I’m not going to apologize until she apologizes first. Or perhaps, I can’t forgive until she repents.

But instead of all this counting and figuring, all this balancing of hurts and slights, Jesus instructs us to simply forgive as we have been forgiven, to extend to others the grace that has been extended to us. How can we possibly do this? Only by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet another of God’s many gifts to us. Truly, forgiveness unlocks the power of love.

### Are there other creeds?

Yes. There are creeds even in Scripture, e.g., Phil. 2:6-11 and Col. 1:15-20.

The earliest creeds were baptismal in nature. Here is one from a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century letter by Ignatius, a martyred Christian leader. You can quickly see its creedal form.

“Be deaf, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.”

The great creeds of the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as the Nicene Creed, were written in response to various Christian heresies that arose, most of which revolved around the person and nature of Jesus. These included denying his genuine humanity and denying his genuine divinity.

You’ll find some other creeds and affirmations in the back of the UMC hymnal.

## Encounter

Wednesday evenings at 6:45 In Wesley Hall

### ***The Cosmic, Crucified Christ: a study in Colossians***

#### **March 31: Seasoned with Salt**

What three pieces of advice about living would you give a new Christian? How about this: pray, live wisely, and speak graciously. Join us as we take a thoughtful look at the fourth and final chapter of Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

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### ***Heresy: Why it Matters What Christians Believe***

This week, Mar 28, in Scott’s 11:00 class: *More Ways to get It Wrong*

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### **What’s Coming in April?**

The 9:30 Teaching Service: *Resurrection Road*

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday class: *A Case for the Crusades?*

Encounter (Wed evening): *Frogs, Freedom, & Faith:  
the story of the Exodus*

Beginning Tues., April 6: A new weekly lunchtime brownbag in-  
depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 12:00 – 1:30, Room 127

<sup>2</sup>from Paul Sampley’s commentary on 2 Corinthians in the *New Interpreters Bible*, available in the St. Andrew library.