



Communion of Saints  
April 23, 2006

Romans 8:31-39  
**Separation Anxiety**  
M. Craig Barnes

This is a very important Sunday in the life of our church. It is the day we remember those in our congregation who have died in the last year. It is not by accident that this is the first Sunday after Easter, when we just proclaimed the love of God that is stronger than death.

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The early part of Jesus' ministry was filled with activity. He went where he wanted to go and said what he wanted to say. He healed the sick, forgave the sinner, and fed the hungry. But you will recall from Lent and Holy Week that a time came when things were done to Jesus. He was arrested by soldiers, led to the high priest, and taken to Pilate. He was judged, beaten, and finally nailed on the cross.

At some point in every life, there comes a time when you realize that you are not in control. Then you are in the hands of forces that are shaping and molding your life. If you have lost your health, your dreams, or your marriage, you know about this experience. But death is the greatest and most painful illustration of the loss of control. And it is not our own deaths that we struggle over the most. No, the hardest struggle is over the death of those we love.

If I were to ask you to describe yourself, you may begin by telling me about your work but if you really wanted me to know you, you would describe your family, the people you love. In fact, it is impossible to know who we are apart from these relationships. So when someone we cherish dies, we haven't just lost a relationship; we've lost a part of ourselves. It is as if a leg or an arm has been severed. Part of our identity has been amputated. That is why it makes no sense when well meaning friends encourage the grieving to get over it. How do you get over a missing limb? It's never going to grow back. You will never be whole again. You may become accustomed to the grief in time, but you will never stop missing someone who was part of you.

Those who have literally lost a limb to an accident or a disease describe what is called phantom pain, which means that even though the limb is missing, it still hurts. Similarly, raw emotional nerves tell you that you should still have a cherished loved one in your life. When you walk into the house, you instinctively call out to the deceased to announce that you are home. When you receive good news at work, sometimes you have the phone in your hand before you realize you cannot call this person anymore. And when you get to the holidays, especially the holidays, you just expect to see your loved one in his or her favorite places.

Those of us who live by the Great Faith of the church, who have learned to stand and say the creed week after week and who believe in the holy promises of the Bible, know where our loved ones are after they die. We know they are in heaven. We know we will see them again. What we don't know is how to keep going in this life. It is the separation that is so hard and the missing that makes us so lonely.

One of the first things we teach our students in the seminary about pastoral care is never, ever, say "I know how you feel." Those whose hearts are torn apart by grief rightly insist, "No one knows how I feel. No one has experienced the loss of this particular person. No one knows my lonely yearning." Yes, that is true, but we cannot just keep yearning. If the human spirit is to survive, we have to find the people who have been cut away from us.

This is one of the reasons why the church celebrates communion. It is because our grieving spirits long for reunion with those who have died. At this table we have communion, not only with Jesus Christ, but with all who died in Christ.

At the end of this service we will stand for the annual necrology reading. To this list of the recently deceased church members you will need to add the names of your fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, children and friends who have died. But we do not list out these names just as a memorial. Oh no, this is a list of those from whom we can never be separated.

"I am convinced," Paul wrote, "that nothing, nothing, certainly not death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Since these people have died *in Christ*, they have been risen *in Christ*. And at this table our broken hearts, our amputated selves, find communion with those who are missing. For *in Christ*, we have discovered we are never separated.

The Maryknoll Missionaries, who served in Latin America during the years of revolution when so many were unjustly killed, tell us that periodically the churches there will also do what we are doing today. But when the priest reads the names of those who have died, after each name the whole congregation says, "Presente." As a part of the great cloud of witnesses, they are declared present to the living community because God's gift of eternal life triumphs even over the separation of death.

As Paul also writes, "If God is for us, who is against us?" If God is for us, what do we need to fear? Hope is the most counter-cultural affirmation of the church. Our hope defies injustice. It proclaims that God is in control. Not drunk drivers. Not war or death squads, not disease or accidents, not even bodies that eventually wear out. If God is for us, we will not grieve as those without hope. If God is for us, death is not the end. Isn't that what we just proclaimed last week at Easter? If death is not the end, then our loved ones are not gone. They are not even missing! That is because your communion at this table is not only with God, but with all the saints who have died in the faith.

In some Christian traditions, the term "saint" is reserved for those who were heroic in the faith, who did miraculous things. But not in our tradition. We believe that all who live as "Christ-

ians” are given the saintly status of Christ. Your deceased parents, grandparents, spouses, friends, and children are then also a part of the communion of saints.

When we come to this table, we come to find communion with all who died and now live eternally in Christ. You cannot commune with Christ without also finding mystical union with all who are in Christ. Here we meet the apostles Peter and Paul. Here we meet the great leaders of the faith like Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Mother Theresa, and the men and women who poured their lives into this congregation. And here we meet our deceased loved ones, whom we still love.

I believe they are now waiting with the risen and ascended Christ to have communion with you. And the table talk is just incredible. If you listen closely you can hear them encourage you to finish your race well—and to feel their strength and love. Because nothing can separate us from love. Nothing. Certainly not death. Amen.

*Benediction: Only after Easter can we proclaim this great death-defying hope: O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!*