

“I Believe in the Church and the Communion of Saints”

Date: July 22, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Creed, series

Theme: Church, Body of Christ

Texts: Hebrews 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:7

“I believe in the Church.” A lot of people don’t anymore; they’ve given up on organized religion. They may profess a faith in God; they may claim to be spiritual but not religious, but fewer and fewer people have faith in the Church anymore. And that’s too bad. I’ll tell you why in a minute.

When we come to this phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, we don’t only say ‘I believe in the Church,’ we actually say “I believe in the *holy catholic* church.” Now that’s a mouthful. And a whole lot of people have trouble saying it and meaning it.

Because when many people view the Church, it looks neither holy nor catholic. It seems filled with hypocrites and judgmental people. They see the faults of the people who go to church and they see neither holiness, nor catholicity, especially when they look at the most vocal Christians and outspoken churches today.

But what do those words mean? It helps to understand that when we say ‘we believe in the *holy catholic* church,’ we’re not saying the church is filled with really righteous people who are nearly perfect. The word *holy* in the biblical context means “belonging to God,” or “sacred to God,” or “set apart for God.”

I agree the church is not made up of perfect people. I know I’m not. How about you? Have you heard this expression? – “The church is not a country club for perfect people but is rather a hospital for broken and sinful people who are slowly being made well.”

The church, then, is holy when those who are a part of her realize the church belongs to God and not to the people. She is holy when people ask

“What does God want his Church to do for him?” instead of “What can our church do for me?” The church is holy when it is striving to know and do God’s will, not when it’s trying to please its members.

But what about the word *catholic*, what do we mean by that word? The way it is used here in the Creed, *catholic* is an adjective. It does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. It refers to the inclusive nature of all the people who claim Jesus to be Lord. It is a reminder of the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17, that all his churches might be one. Another word we might use would be *universal*.

Tragically today there are many divisions within the Christian family. We are quite divided and continue to be a divided church in spite of what we say. However, our belief in the *holy catholic* church is an expression of our hope and desire that all who call upon the name of Jesus and seek to follow him as Savior and Lord, despite their denominational names, are still part of the one universal church.

But what do we mean when we use the word *church*? The Greek word for “church” that is used more than 80 times in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which literally means *called out*. The church is a community or assembly of people who are called out of the world to belong to Jesus Christ. It is our relationship with Jesus that sets us apart from a synagogue or civic gathering or club.

The other word in the New Testament is *kuriakon*, which means “belonging to the Lord.” The church is the gathering of people, called out by Jesus, who belong to Jesus, and therefore seek not only to fellowship with him but also to do his will and work in the world.

Listen to how our *UM Book of Discipline* defines the church:

“The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.”

Here’s what you need to know. The church is NOT the building. The church is made up of the people. The church does NOT exist for itself; it exists for the world, a broken and hurting world. The church continues to preach and teach the good news of Jesus Christ so that others can come to faith. Baptism and Holy Communion are practiced as a means of grace.

The one who is in charge of the church is NOT the pastor, nor the bishop, nor the Church Council. Rather, it is under the discipline of the Holy Spirit. God, through the Spirit directs the life and activity of the church.

Obviously there are times when people will rebel and resist the Holy Spirit. Often, people have been hurt by the actions of fellow church members. Some people have quit the church because of the hurt they have experienced. But just as we do not quit our marriage because sometimes the husband or the wife hurts the other, neither should we give up on the church because of the shortcomings of some people.

There are many images used to describe the church. One of the more popular images is that of a family. Some refer to their local church as their church family. The idea of church as a family comes with responsibilities – families care for one another, work for the good of one another, and support one another. Paul instructs us to “carry one another’s burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

The Greek New Testament word for this kind of caring for one another is *koinonia*, meaning “communion” or “sharing.” We usually translate this word as *fellowship*. It involves getting to know others, building relationships with them, and actively caring for and encouraging them.

I see it happening at Lakewood – when a member offers to transport another member to the doctor’s office or to go get groceries, or when food is taken to the house when someone comes home from the hospital, or when people send cards for birthdays, sympathy, anniversaries, or get well.

I could go on and on about the loving ways that Lakewood cares for one another. But let me challenge you, because we can always do better. Too often a person is overlooked, forgotten or not remembered. It’s usually not done intentionally, but it reveals our human and broken nature.

We ought not to rest on our laurels, pat ourselves on the back and say, “Well done.” Rather, we ought to be asking, “Who else among us needs to experience the love of Christ? Is there anyone we have overlooked?” (Oh, and by the way, it doesn’t hurt if you speak up and let us know that you have a need or a concern. We’re not mind-readers).

One final image to describe the church, and that is Body of Christ. The church is more than just a fellowship of people who care for each other. Listen to the words of Paul from 1 Corinthians 12:27: “You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.” This image of the church as the body of Christ is really important.

I take it to mean that the church incarnates Jesus in the world today. God became flesh through Jesus, and in a similar way Jesus becomes incarnate through the church. We are his hands, his feet, his mouth. We

are meant to continue the ministry that Jesus began, to re-present Jesus to the world.

We are called to work for justice, to show compassion, to serve others. Why? Because that is what Jesus did and asks us to do as well. When God sees pain, brokenness, injustice and need in the world, God doesn't send angels to address those needs; God sends the church. Imagine how the world would be different if every church were seeking to continue the work of Jesus in the world around them.

I need to keep moving – the Apostle's Creed goes on to speak of the "communion of saints." When Paul used the word *saint* in the New Testament, he was not referring to extraordinary Christians who had been canonized by the church; rather this was Paul's preferred way of referring to all Christians. Saints are the ones who are set apart for God's work.

For Christians, the words *saint* and holy refer to both a *present* reality and a *future* calling. Those who have said "yes" to Jesus and who seek to be God's people are, in a sense, already holy.

But in another sense, they are not yet holy – they continue to strive for that life which God calls them to. We call that process of going on to greater goodness and holiness *sanctification*.

To believe *in the communion of saints* is to believe in the fellowship between Christians still alive and also with those who have gone to Heaven. As UM's we do not pray to the saints, but we do believe that we have a mystical connection to those who have gone before us.

I don't believe the dead are in heaven watching every move we make, although I believe they do pray for us. I love the image of Hebrews 11, where the author talks about the great cloud of witnesses that surround us. I imagine the saints in glory encouraging us as we run the race of faith

with perseverance. And so, “I believe in the holy, catholic church and in the communion of saints.” Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, pp. 107-127