

The Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints
Sermon Delivered on June 8, 2014
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Last week we took a break from our sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. I joyfully admit, it was a refreshing break. Not that I am bored with the Apostles' Creed, but it was a breath of fresh air to have our young adults plan and lead worship. They were inspiring and we were inspired. They gave us hope for the future of this church. They are the hope for the future of THE church.

But last week was also the perfect setup for this week because today is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the birth of the church, and because today in our sermon series we have come to that part in the Apostles' Creed that says: "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." It is also perfect timing because today after the service we get to go out and practice being the church with the people of our community at our second annual community picnic.

So let's see what we can discover about being the church by unpacking today's portion of the Creed. First of all, it seems important to say that we live in a day when to say we believe in the church puts us in the minority. Going to church and being a member of a church are no longer fashionable in our society. More and more people classify themselves as spiritual, but are turned off by what is referred to as "organized" religion otherwise known as the church. And to be honest, sometimes it does seem like a stretch of the imagination to say THIS is the holy catholic church, that WE are the communion of saints. Because let's face it, aren't there times when the church is a little like Noah's ark? The only way to stand the stench on the inside is to remember the storm raging on the outside! (We Believe, James Harnish, ebook pg. 131 of 176). Not that we do this at Bethany, right? The point is, without a doubt, the church, as an institution, is nowhere near perfect.

So if we feel this is the case, what does it mean to say the church is holy? Well, biblically, the word holy simply describes something or someone who is set apart for the purpose of God. In the Old Testament, the Temple was holy. Why? Because it was set apart for the worship of God. The people of the covenant were holy. Why? Because they sensed a special calling to fulfill God's purpose. In the New Testament the Greek word for "church" is ecclesia, which literally means "the called out ones." To say that the church is holy then is to say that ordinary people like us have been called out by

God for God's purpose. Just as the president calls someone to be an ambassador to another country, we, the people of faith, are called out of the world to bear witness to the world of God's great act of love and grace in Jesus Christ. In this way, we are chosen, not for privilege, but for service, to be a living model of the kingdom of God, which is being fulfilled on earth even as it is already fulfilled in heaven. (We Believe, James Harnish, ebook pg. 133 of 176). So the church, when it is doing what it was created to do, is holy.

But perhaps the most common question asked about the Creed by those in Protestant churches is: Why do we say we believe in the holy catholic church? Well, there are two ways to use the word catholic. If you are talking about the Roman Catholic Church with a capital "C," you are talking about a particular witnessing part of the body of Christ, based in Rome and presided over by the pope. But if you say catholic with a small "c," you are using the word as an adjective that means universal, describing all of us, everywhere, that bear witness to Jesus Christ. So despite differences within and between denominations, the church at its best is one universal family, transcending nationality, race, language, culture, political and economic systems (We Believe, James Harnish, ebook pg. 136 of 176).

I have experienced this catholicity of the greater church right here at Bethany. One of the places it is most obvious is in the Cold Weather Shelter ministry. Although this ministry began at Bethany and is housed at Bethany – a United Methodist Church – it has evolved into a very ecumenical ministry of the universal body of Christ. Although there are quite a number of faithful Bethany volunteers that provide a core catalyst for this ministry, some volunteers come from other United Methodist Churches – like Coker and Windcrest, but there are also Catholics (with a capital "C"), Lutherans, and Presbyterians that participate. We could not continue this ministry without the help of our non-Methodist brothers and sisters in Christ. Together we serve the least of these. Together we are a universal witness of Jesus Christ to those who need food and shelter on cold winter nights. Together we are the church.

Moving on, the next line of the Creed says we believe in the communion of saints. But just exactly what is a saint? Groucho Marx once remarked that he wouldn't want to join a club that would have him as a member! (McGrath, 95) Many of us feel the same way when we think about the church as a communion of saints. If I am a saint, then the church is in big trouble. And this may also be why some people have an aversion to organized religion. They think, "You call yourselves saints, but you act like

sinner.” Well, the fact is, we are saints AND we are sinners. These terms are not mutually exclusive. Because saints are not perfect people. They are holy people with their fair share of human faults. But just as the church is holy or “set apart,” saints are holy and set apart for God’s purpose. So, believe it or not, we are saints, but the important thing to remember is this: “we can only claim we are holy because of our calling, not because of nature” (“I Believe”: Exploring the Apostles’ Creed, Alister McGrath, pg. 95).

So then, what does it mean to be a communion of saints? Well the Latin word *Communio* means either fellowship or sharing (The Apostles’ Creed for Today, Justo Gonzalez, pg. 80). These days when we say fellowship we usually mean a time of convivial conversation at a potluck, but fellowship also means being a support for one another. And this kind of fellowship implies sharing. We are sharing our joys and our sorrows. We are sharing our good advice and practical experience. We are also sharing our time, talents, and wealth. But first and foremost, we are sharing God’s love with others. And this sharing extends beyond the boundaries of our communion; it spreads out into the community, otherwise known as our mission field.

In this respect, I believe the word communion helps us to understand that the church was never meant to be “a static building,” but rather “a dynamic pilgrim people” who are constantly growing in faith by loving God and who are building the kingdom by sharing God’s love. And our communion includes those who have gone ahead of us as well as those who will follow. It spans all time and includes all places. But today, especially today, I think it is important for us to understand that we as the communion of saints in this place and at this time are called to share the love we have been given in Christ in the here and now. And we have a tremendous opportunity to do just that right after worship at the Community Picnic. So accept your role as part of the communion of saints and take advantage of the opportunity to share God’s love with someone in our community today.

Now I mentioned earlier that today is Pentecost Sunday. Our Scripture reading from Acts tells the story of the day the church was born through the power of the Holy Spirit. Again, I believe that remembering this story helps us to understand, the church was never meant to be a place, or a building. The church is the people. People who were and are set apart to receive the Holy Spirit. People who were called out of the world to be the light of Christ for the world.

This light, the Holy Spirit, is symbolized as a flame of fire. Verse 3 of our reading says, "They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them." But we have to understand that Pentecost was not a one-time historical event to be celebrated like D-Day or the 4th of July. It is an on-going spiritual phenomenon because that same flame is burning in each one of us today.

So as I contemplated Pentecost, the Apostles' Creed, and the church we are called to be, I thought about fire and an interesting illustration from nature caught my attention. I want to share it with you this morning.

They say there was a time that the Red Woods in Yosemite National Park were becoming extinct. These beautiful trees that had grown for generation after generation were dying, and no one could figure out why. Some scientists did a study and found out that red wood tree seeds have an extremely heavy shell, so heavy that unless a fire melts the outer shell the seed cannot germinate. Before park rangers came on the scene, if a bolt of lightning hit a tree and started a fire, the fire would burn part of the forest, the shells would melt, the seeds would germinate, and new generation of trees was born. But with the coming of rangers, fires were put out almost as soon as they were started, preventing the seeds from germinating and resulting in a dying forest. Fortunately for the future of the forest, we now know that in order to have another generation of trees there must be a fire. (<https://sermons.logos.com/submissions/29461-Fire-on-the-Altar-Sermon-wps#content=/submissions/29461>).

I believe there is a profound lesson in this for us as the church. Because in our day, many would say the church is dying. And the truth is, there are several generations of folks with some pretty hard shells. Some are hard because they don't see church as a living, dynamic, evolving thing. To them the church is a place they can go once a week to be told what they should and shouldn't do, what they can and cannot believe. Others have hard shells because life has been hard on them – they struggle with financial difficulties, addictions, bad health, or lack of compassion and caring. All of these things leave the seeds extremely dry. The good news is this is a perfect setup for a fire. However, I can assure you, no amount of preaching is going to melt through those hard shells. New life can only come about when they can see and experience love. So guess what, my friends? The fire of God's love that burns within us CAN melt those hard shells. Today, in just a few minutes, as we leave this place, with God's love burning in our hearts, we go out into our community as the church ready to ignite a fire that cannot be put out.

I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, I believe because We are the church. We are set apart and called out for God's purpose to build the kingdom right here and right now. And just like those disciples in that upper room in Jerusalem, we have been filled with love and empowered by the Holy Spirit so that we can set the world on fire! Amen.