

July 2 – I Believe in the Church and the Communion of Saints

Hebrews 12:1-2

As we continue to look at the Apostles Creed we come to the most misunderstood phrase in the creed. *I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.* We need to first unpack that phrase “holy catholic church” before we can understand what the original writers of the creed were saying to us and what it means for us today.

Let’s begin with the term church. What does church mean? The word literally means called out. An assembly called together, in this case by God. It is an intentional community of faith. We are also told that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Too often we forget this and think of church mainly as the buildings in which we worship God. There is a song, “We are the Church” where it talks about how the church is not a building, the church is the people. Whenever Christians gather they are a church, a community of the faithful, and it is in them and through them the Holy Spirit lives and moves.

We also say we believe in a church that is holy. To many, the church doesn’t look very holy. It seems filled with hypocrites and judgmental people. It often seems the source of much angry, hateful and exclusionary speech. The word “Holy” in the biblical context means belonging to God, or sacred to God or set apart for God. The church is holy when those who are part of her recognize that she belongs to God and not to her members. She is holy when those who consider the church their home don’t ask, “What do we want our church to do for us?” but rather “What does God want the church to do for God and for others?” So, when we proclaim we believe in a holy church we are challenging ourselves to be that for each other and for the world. Being holy means offering forgiveness even when our feelings have been hurt. Being holy is striving to intentionally live each day in faith. Being holy is an awareness that we belong to God and so it isn’t about us and our wants but about what we can do for others.

The idea that we believe in a holy church means we proclaim our need to be in community, supporting one another, trying to be holy in the sense of blessing others. At

the Church of the Resurrection their care teams are called stretcher-bearers. This comes from the story of the paralytic who could not reach Jesus so his friends climbed up on the roof, took it apart and then lowered him to the feet of Jesus. They carried his stretcher so he could find healing and grace. This is what they see the mission of the church to be, carry one another's burdens so they can find healing and grace. Think of the people who have been your stretcher-bearers, being there for you in time of need. This is what the church is meant to look like. The church is God's answer to our existential need for belonging, communing, acceptance, support and love. Caring communities are made up of people who go the extra mile, who give up their time to serve others, who go out of their way to bless others. The church is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, a place of acceptance and transformation. Here is how Peter describes the church. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession" (I Peter 2:9). When we, by our actions, show love, compassion, kindness and a hunger for justice we are the body of Christ, we are being holy. As we were called out of darkness into the light, so too we call the world. To move from darkness to light.

Now we come to the word that everyone in a protestant church looks at and says, "Why is that there?" Why would we still think it is important to proclaim we believe in a holy catholic church? Catholic here does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic comes from a compound Greek word that means, in essence, everywhere. The word was first used to be a reminder of the church's unity: every community of believers across the Roman Empire and beyond was bound together in the gospel. Despite differences in language or ethnic makeup, these communities were a part of one church, everywhere, the catholic church. This was important at the time the Apostle's Creed was written. Divisions among people were as strong then as now. Remember how Paul talked about there was neither slave nor free, Gentile or Jew, male or female but one in Christ. This was proclaiming a catholic church. This phrase was to point up that we are truly holy when we are embracing of all. This is why we believe in the holy catholic church.

The problem is that today catholic has come to mean a particular branch of the church dating back to the year 1054 when the Western church and Eastern church divided. In a remarkable bit of posturing, the Western church claimed the name Catholic—they were the universal church or one might say the real church. The Eastern church claimed to be the Orthodox church meaning right worship and by implication right beliefs and practices, hence they positioned themselves as the church who believed and worshiped in the right way.

To claim we believe in the holy catholic church is to claim a belief in the ecumenical idea that all who call upon the name of Christ and seek to follow him as Savior and Lord are, despite their denominational or nondenominational names, part of one universal church. And, when we live out that unity in love we are most holy. In a strictly secular perspective, we are healthier, happier, and live longer when we are in community with others. From a spiritual point, we need community to grow in faith.

This creed also talks about belief in the Communion of Saints. For Christians, the word saint refers to both a present reality and a future calling. This calling of us to be saints and the process of becoming saints is what is meant by the term sanctification, a good Wesleyan term. All Christians are called to belong wholly to Christ, to become like him. It is the call to love God with all that is within us. To become saint-ified happens through the power and work of the Holy Spirit within us.

Ordinary saints take thirty minutes off work to donate blood and help to save the life of another. They turn off the lights when they leave a room in order to be good stewards of the earth's resources. They visit homebound friends or take a neighbor to the doctors. They show up for a Bible study or are the first to volunteer when the church is in mission. They visit the elderly who have no family in town. They find ways to bless others without seeking recognition. They have a heart of compassion. These ordinary saints pay attention each day, watching for moments when God needs them to reach out to someone who needs care. They think less and less of themselves and more and more of others as they grow in faith. I am not the ordinary saint I want to be, but I am on the journey. I believe in the community of other saints here on earth to help me to grow.

I also believe I am surrounded by those who have gone before me who are cheering me on. Our scripture today talks about how we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. We could just as easily use the word saints. I give thanks for all those who have lived and struggled and sometimes died for our faith. I would not be here without those witnesses that went before me. I also believe this awareness makes me a better Christian today. I think of them surrounding me and I don't want to disappoint them. I, too, want to carry on and pass forward the gift I have received from them. I am looking forward to that ultimate reunion with those beloved saints who I have known and who have blessed me.

When you sit with people as they exit this life and join the saints of heaven you begin to be aware of how thin is the veil that separates us. As I talk with them and watch them I see the faithful often living as much on that side of the curtain as this side. They begin to see and talk and experience the fruits of heaven. Their dying reminds me of the cloud of witnesses and my call to be faithful.

So what does it mean to say, I believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints? I am reminded that, when Jesus came he did not simply call individual disciples, he formed a community, a family, a people chosen to love and to continue his work in the world. This assembly or gathering is meant to be a foretaste of heaven, a place where people care for one another, encourage one another, and build one another up. But it is also meant to be a community empowered and led by the Holy Spirit, that serves as the continuing presence of Christ in the world. The church is holy because she belongs to God and is set apart for God's work. She is catholic because in God's eyes there is only one church, though it is made up of many tribes, nations, and denominations. God's church is a communion of saints below and saints above who are bound together as members of God's family. May we live as part of this great assembly, located here and beyond and may we be stretcher-bearers for others as they will be for us.