

I BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS...

Apostles' Creed Sermon Series, week 4

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 16:15-18, Acts 9:31

1 Corinthians 12:12-20, 27, 1 Peter 2:9-10

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We began this sermon series as we confirmed our belief in "*God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*" This means that we believe in a creative, intelligent, powerful, relational and loving God who created this big, awesome universe and each one of us. Belief and trust in such a God fills us with gratitude and praise and allows us to live each day with a sense of peace, hope and purpose.

We also confirmed our belief in "Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord..." In Jesus, God put on flesh, met us on our ground and walked in our shoes. Because of Jesus we know God has a heart for those who are lost, hurting, sick, poor and oppressed. Jesus' death helped us understand the depth of God's love and the costliness of grace. Jesus' resurrection helped us understand God's triumphant power over evil, sin and death. To believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord is to commit ourselves to living and loving like he did.

And then last week, we confirmed that we believe in "*the Holy Spirit.*" The Holy Spirit is God's imminent presence – a presence that comes alongside us and is at work within us to empower, guide and shape us. The Spirit helps us pray, urges us to be more like Jesus, and compels us to take steps in that direction. We also spent time last week, trying to better understand both the mystery and blessing of believing in one God who is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We refer to this triune nature of God as the Trinity.

Today, we declare I believe in "*the holy catholic church and the communion of saints.*" We do so at a time when there is an increasing number of people who are not sure they need the church; they are not sure they like the church enough to be a part of it. But the thing is, it was not imperfect church participants who came up with the church idea, it was Jesus' idea. He pulled together a group of 12 disciples to begin with; he taught them and organized them. Eventually, there were also women and others who followed. On the day of Pentecost, there were 120 Jesus followers gathered in an upper room, but that number increased by 3,000 when the Holy Spirit showed up. Clearly, Jesus thought it was important to bring people together and for them to stay together. One day, Jesus was teaching his disciples and asking them questions when he looked at Simon and said, "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18). Not only was the church Jesus' idea, but he also said that nothing would be more powerful and have a greater impact in the world than his church.

So, what does it mean to believe that the church is holy? Biblically, the word "*holy*" means "*belonging to God*" or "*set apart for God*." Perhaps you have heard it said that the church is not a country club for perfect people, but instead a hospital for broken and sinful people who are slowly being made well. The

church is holy only when those who are a part of her recognize that she belongs to God and not to her members. The church is "holy" when those of us who are a part of it aren't asking, "What do we want our church to do for us?" but rather "What does Jesus Christ want us, his church, to do for him?" The church is not and never will be holy because of us, but only because of Jesus.

I know some of you are wondering about the word "*catholic*." It is used in the Apostles' Creed as an adjective. It means "*everywhere*" or "*all around*." In the New Testament, the word was used to emphasize the unity of every community of believers across the Roman Empire and beyond. "*Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers*" (Acts 9:31). Despite differences in language and ethnic makeup in the expanding early church the word "*catholic*" with a small "c" emphasized that each community was a part of one church which was located everywhere. Today, "*Catholic*" with a capital "C" has come to mean a particular branch of the church dating back to when the Western and Eastern churches divided into the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Today, there are many branches within the Christian family, and yet despite this reality, we believe that all who call upon the name of Christ and seek to follow him as Lord and Savior are part of one universal church.

I've shared some insight about the word "holy" and the word "*catholic*," but what about the word "church?" I think most of us know already that the church is not a building though we refer to buildings like this as a church. And it's true that buildings like this are physical spaces that churches inhabit and use for activities such as worship, fellowship, Christian discipleship, and mission work. Buildings are important tools, but the church is a people. The Greek word for "church" that is used in the New Testament is "*ekklesia*." It's a word that literally means "called out," as in a gathering of people called together. It was not a religious term but a secular term at the time that meant "an assembly." So, in the New Testament, the church is the gathering of people called out by Jesus, who belong to Jesus, and who seek not only to experience fellowship with him, but who also desire to do his will and to continue his work in the world.

As a community gathered in Christ's name, something very special happens when we worship, fellowship and serve in Christ's name because in the process we also encourage, support and bless one another. Clearly, we do not always get this living in Christian community right. Dysfunction exists because churches are made up of imperfect people who are all struggling to live the values and faith we proclaim. In other words, we get it wrong sometimes. However, over the years, I have heard so many people say how blessed they've been by the community of faith who has come beside them to encourage, support and pray for them during a difficult time of illness or loss. Personally, I was a recipient of such support from you, from this congregation when my mom was sick and dying. It is a blessing that can still bring tears to my eyes as I remember how you were the church for me and my dad at that time.

Nearly a hundred times in the New Testament, the Apostles Paul and Peter as well as others addressed the Christians they were writing to as "*brothers and sisters*." The metaphor of the church as a family is prevalent, and being a family

comes with the family responsibilities of caring for one another, working for the good of one another, and supporting one another. The Greek New Testament word for this kind of caring for one another is "*Koinonia*," and it means "*communion*" or "*sharing*," and is often translated as "*fellowship*." The church is Christ's assembly of people, but it is also a family that specializes in fellowship. The fellowship of the church is about getting to know others, building relationships, and actively caring for and encouraging them. The church is God's answer to our human need for belonging, community, acceptance, support, and love.

Therefore, being a member of a church family requires showing up. It's by showing up that we can look around and see who is alone, who may need a friend, and who needs encouragement. It's by showing up that we can invite someone to sit with us or ask if we can sit with them. To be a church member means visiting the elderly, the sick and praying for those who need our prayers; it means providing support and care for those who are hurting. To be a church member is to show up not just for the personal blessings you receive from others, but so that you can be that blessing for someone else. In other words, it's not just that you need the church, the church needs you. There are people here who need you to show up, to offer a word of encouragement, to teach a class, to lead a support group, to stand at the door and welcome people, and to pray.

The church is an assembly, a community that is meant to be a family, but it's even more than that. "*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*" (1 Corinthians 12:27). This image of the church as the body of Christ means that the church is supposed to incarnate Christ in the world, and each one of us has a part in making sure that happens. God became flesh in Jesus, and Jesus becomes flesh through the church. The church, the body of Christ continues the ministry that Jesus began. We continue it with the help of the Holy Spirit and by embodying the love and grace of God like Jesus did.

In December I preached a sermon series on Angels, and at that time I shared with you that scripturally, there are both heavenly angels and human angels. When God sees pain and brokenness, injustice and need in the world, God sends his human angels to address those problems. He sends his church. There are about 2.6 billion Christians in the world. Imagine the potential if everyone was an active participant in a community of faith that was actively doing Christ's work in the world. Peter described the church in this way: "*You are... God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Peter 2:9). And how do you proclaim and live the wonderful acts of God? How do you "*let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16)? It is by our acts of love, compassion, kindness and justice that others most clearly see Jesus, who is the Light of the World, in us. It's by going to the Food Bank, participating in a mission trip, giving to special offerings, tying blankets... that others have the opportunity to see Christ in us.

So, what if when people think of our church, they don't first think of its location and the size of our membership, but instead think of the size of our heart and the way we serve in this community and beyond? And what if we were known not only for how well we love one another, but also for our willingness to love those outside the walls of our church? It takes all of us to be the church Christ calls us to be, but if we are each committed to being the church then God will use us to change the world. Communities of faith who are serious about being Christ's church are made up of people who go the extra mile, who roll up their sleeves to serve others, and who go out of their way to encourage and support others.

And now as we approach the community of faith blessing that is Holy Communion, I want to say something about "*the communion of saints*." In the New Testament the word "saints" was Paul's preferred way of referring to all Christians. Biblically, saints are ordinary people who yield their lives to God and who become defined by their love. To believe in the "communion of saints" is a beautiful thing. It means that those of us who are striving to be more like Jesus as the saints on earth and those who are the fully sanctified saints in heaven are somehow bound together through Christ. Whenever Christians gather for worship, we enter into a space where heaven and earth meet which I believe means we are never closer to our loved ones who have died and are with God in heaven than when we worship. And whenever we share in holy communion, well that is like icing on the cake when it comes to connecting with the saints in heaven.

So, as members of the holy catholic church who believe in the communion of saints, I invite you to a sacramental opportunity to connect with Jesus, with one another, and with the saints in heaven. Because we practice open communion in the United Methodist church all are welcome to come, partake, and be filled. Let's us begin our preparation as we enter into confession...