

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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June 26, 2016
John 17:6-11, 14-23
1 Peter 2:4-10

A CREDIBLE CREED? - THE HOLY cATHOLIC cHURCH

There are plenty of things we can't see that are not too difficult to believe in. We believe in the invisible wind as we see and feel its effects. We believe in love as we have experienced how one person can impact us. We believe in gravity, particularly when we are going uphill. We gather here as people who believe in a God whom we can't see, but with whom we can have a relationship. The old English proverb, "Seeing is believing," doesn't preclude us from believing in that which we can't see.

However, there are many who have a hard time believing in the church precisely because of what they have seen. Today is the first in a series of sermons on the last section of the Apostles' Creed, which includes the affirmation, "I believe in the holy catholic church." We have seen parts of the church that have gone through the scandal of church leaders sexually abusing children and youth with an extraordinarily anemic response to such a crisis. Since the Orlando shootings two weeks ago, a number of extremist pastors have preached how they wished more people in the gay nightclub had actually been killed. Of course, these are the kinds of sensational stories that news media pick up. Unfortunately, some people have come to think these kinds of stories are close to the norm for the church of Jesus Christ and have concluded that the church is made up of the worst of hypocrites. I sincerely hope you have experiences with the church that are much more positive in nature, although I am confident that many of you have at some point been hurt by the human institution called the church.

So what does it mean to say that we believe in a human institution like the church? We have seen institutions that once seemed quite secure now looking unstable. What will happen to the institution known as the European Union? The U.S. Congress and even the Supreme Court are no longer held with the respect they once had. There is a wave of anti-institutionalism rolling through various areas of public life, and certainly the church in our country has been impacted by that.

But when we use the Apostles' Creed as an affirmation of faith, when we say we believe in the holy catholic church, we are expressing trust not in a human institution, but in a divine instigation. In this Trinitarian creed that was developed between the third and seventh centuries to try to reflect the faith of the apostles, we see the creed organized in three paragraphs. This sermon series focuses on the lines in the last paragraph that follow the line, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." It is indeed the instigating work of the Spirit we will be exploring in this sermon series.

To say we believe in the holy catholic church is not to express trust in church buildings, which can literally be shaken by earthquakes. As much as I love the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), what we say in the creed is not an expression of trust in any one denomination that could be figuratively shaken by scandal or controversy. Church with a capital C refers to a particular denomination like the PC(USA) or a particular congregation like Warner Memorial Church. Catholic with a capital C normally refers to the Roman Catholic Church. But the creed uses a small c for the words 'catholic' and 'church.' The word 'catholic' with a small c means universal, so we affirm that people of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions can all be part of what God identifies as the universal church. The word catholic or universal reminds us that what God is doing is always bigger than what we can see. Believing goes beyond seeing. The idea of the church catholic or universal reminds us of the inclusive nature of the Spirit who brought the church into being. It beckons us to pull for and pray for and pay for with time, energy, and money the demonstration of God's good news not just locally, but all around the globe. The Greek word used in the original language of the New Testament that is translated as church is the word

‘ekklesia.’ It literally means those who are ‘called out’ in order to take on a particular identity and task. The One who does the calling out is the Holy Spirit and the task is partnering with God in ministry to a world in physical and spiritual need.

So part of what we are affirming in this line from the Apostles’ Creed is that we have a God who for some reason partners with foible-abundant humans to carry out significant parts of the divine initiative. There is an old Irish rhyme: “To dwell above with the saints that we love, that will be glory. But to live down below with the saints that we know, now that’s another story.” It is not always easy working together to try to be a faithful part of the church of Jesus Christ, but none of us, no matter how smart or dedicated has a corner on the gospel truth. None of us has perfected love. We need each other. As God works through us, God is also working within us to help us grow in faith, hope, and love. God uses each of us together, so that we can grow in faithfulness even as we face challenges along the way.

Believing in the holy catholic church expresses confidence in the Holy Spirit more so than in our own human initiatives and responses. The church is holy, not because we are theologically faultless or morally perfect, but because those who are called have been set apart by God to serve Jesus Christ in the world. We know very well how imperfect we are. But we have also heard the good news of God’s love for imperfect people, so we are some of the right people to share that news.

In the Gospel of John passage that was read, we hear Jesus right before he was arrested and crucified, praying for his followers. God is pulling for and God empowers those who are called to live out and proclaim the gospel. It would be easier to believe in the holy catholic church if we were seeing our pews being filled to overflowing, if our ministries were fully funded and peopled, if there weren’t so many people in our society who ignored our efforts. But we affirm that there is One who instigated the church who doesn’t ignore our efforts. What makes belief in the holy catholic church credible is that we have an incredible God working through those who are called out to serve. That is a belief that calls us to use our lives as well as our minds to affirm our faith. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the holy catholic church. Amen.