

The Building Blocks of Belief:
“We Believe in the Church Universal”

Matthew 16:13-26

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We believe in the holy catholic Church – Church.

I love the Church. She has nurtured me like a mother from my birth. I was carried by believing parents into her presence as a baby. I can count on one hand the number of weeks in 57 years I have missed worship. After 3000 Sundays and 9000 worship services, and 5000 sermons preached, I still love the Church. As Timothy Dwight said nearly 300 years ago:

“For her my tears shall fall
For her my prayers ascend
To her my cares and toils be given
Till toils and cares shall end.”

I love the Church. I believe in the holy catholic Church. Let me try to unpack that creed.

THE CHURCH IS OF GOD: IT IS HOLY.

The Church is not about you. A new family in town went church shopping one Sunday. On the way home they discussed their experiences. The father thought the sermon was too long. The mother felt the choir was weak. The teenager thought the whole thing was boring. As the discussion went on, the five-year-old spoke up and said, “I thought it was a pretty good show for a quarter,” which was the amount her father had given her for the offering. In an age of baby boomer consumerism I need to say the Church is

not about meeting your needs. The Church is about rearranging your needs to the will of God. It's more about pleasing God than pleasing people.

The Church is not about me. Every once in awhile I go to a pastors' meeting. Usually the agenda consists of telling what is happening at your church. At my church the attendance is growing, money is flowing; the people are going, going, going. When it comes my turn I have always wanted to say, "I don't have a church." Since being ordained, I am not even a member of a local church. I have an awesome privilege and wonderful responsibility to serve a church, but it is not my church.

In an age of ministerial entrepreneurialism, perhaps the power of multiple leadership has been demonstrated here better than any place in America. You can have a great church without the pastor as the chief cornerstone. Jeff planted, Bob watered, Joe tended, I've cultivated. But let there be no doubt about it. It is God who has made it grow.

We believe in the holy catholic Church. The word is *hagious*. It means called out, set apart, different. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. It is different from other days says the commandment. The Tent of Meeting, and later the Temple, in the Old Testament, was different from other buildings. It was a holy place because God was there. The table for Holy Communion is different from other tables because it holds the Holy. The Holy Bible is different from other books because it is holy.

Church is different. If the Church were a country club, we could poll the membership and send assessments in an attempt to please the majority, but the Church is not a country club. If the Church were a business, we could market our products to potential customers and charge for services rendered—fifty dollars for worship, \$100 for a visit, \$150 for baptism and so forth, but the Church is not a business. The Church is not a service agency. If it were, we could tar-

get the population to be served and secure grants and gifts to fund it. While we do many service projects, like Habitat for Humanity, the Church is not essentially a service agency. The Church is of God and as the body of Christ it occupies the precarious position of being in the world but not of the world. The world no more knows what to do with the Church than it knew what to do with Christ. When the Church is the Church, it is more about scriptures than surveys, more about prayer than polls, more about the will of God than the will of people. We believe in the holy catholic church. The Church is different because it is holy.

THE CHURCH IS UNIVERSAL: IT IS CATHOLIC.

A parish is not our world. We are not the only place that the Lord visits on Sunday mornings. There are multiple places by millions of names around the world that are expressions of Christ's body on earth and we, even within our denomination, are only one part of the whole. Did you hear about the group of new arrivals in heaven? St. Peter was showing them around. When he came to a certain worship center he asked everyone in the tour group to be quiet. When someone asked, "Why?" St. Peter replied, "The particular denomination worshipping here think they are the only ones who made it to heaven. I wouldn't want to disillusion them." Every time we make our baptismal waters restricted and our communion tables exclusive, we assume we have some unique right to the grace and mercy of God. God's mercy is not strained; it drops like gentle rain from heaven above. It falls on the Baptists, the Methodists, the Catholics, the Church of Christ, the Pentecostals and the Presbyterians. Whosoever will may come and drink at the fountain that never shall run dry.

Jesus said, "*I have other sheep which are not of this fold. I must bring them too.*" We believe in the holy catholic church. Now someone is surely thinking, I thought I was a Protestant, why am I professing to be a Catholic? The word

catholic is *katholikos*. It means general, universal, inclusive. *"In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26)*. Wesley preached a sermon on the catholic Spirit. "We will not all think alike. We do not all share the same opinions. We will not all worship alike. I hold to the Episcopal form of government but if independent is better, so be it. I think infants ought to be baptized, but if you think otherwise, follow your persuasions. But if your heart is with my heart in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, take my hand." Love me, pray for me, and join me in service to all humanity. That is the catholic spirit.

THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE: IT IS YOU.

"I am the Church. You are the Church. We are the Church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes, we're the Church together."

The word is *Ecclesia*. It means "a people in waiting for a message from God." A few years ago a tornado took down the historic church building in Bardstown, Kentucky. Randy Coy was the pastor. A few days later Randy stood on the conference floor to report on the church in Bardstown. Randy said, "The building was blown into a million pieces, but the Church has never been more together." The church in Bardstown is alive and well because the Church is people.

Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today,
He has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way,
We are the only Bible the careless world will read,
We are the sinner's gospel; we are the scoffer's creed.

What most people know about Christianity is what they see reflected in your life because the Church scattered is just as important as the Church gathered! You are the Church. How is the Church that meets at your house? The Church is a hospital for sinners, and a communion for saints. We should always make sure sinners are welcome. Or, as I say

to those who complain about too many hypocrites in church, come join us, one more won't hurt any. All of us are Christians under construction. No one is perfect. No, not one. The Church is, however, a communion of saints. The best people on earth can be found in church.

Today is Mother's Day. The Church has given me mothers. God gave me a birth mother who carried me to church in her arms and offered me to God long before I made any decisions on my own. I think of Kathryn, a farm lady in a student pastorate I served. She raised the most remarkable chickens. They laid eggs wrapped in ten dollar bills. As least that's how I found them at my door on Sundays. She was a mother to me. I think about Annie Laurie. She taught me how to speak without murdering the English language. She would hand me the Sunday bulletin after worship highlighting all the grammatical errors I made in my sermon that day. I think about Ida Mae. She tried to teach me enough social skills to get me through the simplest of parties. She taught me gently, softly and graciously.

Time does not permit me to tell of Ruth, who walked with God and made the best chicken salad this side of heaven, or Mini, or Martha, or Ann and others who had the courage to believe in me when I could not believe in myself. A thousand sermons finely delivered could not express my gratitude for all that I am, all I hope to be, I owe to the saints and sinners that I have known in the churches I have served.

Let the Church be the Church
Let us continue telling the story
Let the Church be the Church
Let us resolve to make it holy
Let the Church be the Church
To God be honor and glory
Now and forever. Amen.