

***Sermon Series: "I Believe in..."***

***Sermon Title: "The Holy catholic Church and the Communion of Saints"***

***Matthew 5:14-16; 9:35-38; 28:16; John 17:20-23;***

***1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Galatians 6:1-2; 9-10; Hebrews 12:1-2***

***Salem United Methodist Church; August 18, 2019***

***Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling***

For the past few weeks we have been working our way through the Apostles' Creed. This week our focus is on the phrase that follows, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." That phrase is "The holy catholic church and the communion of saints." This is a mouthful. Some of us may be unsure if we believe in this phrase or may be unsure of its meaning. What do these words mean and why are they important to our faith as followers of Jesus? In this sermon, we will look at each part of this phrase.

**Holy:** Rarely, do we call ourselves holy. I don't know anyone who walks around and says, "I'm holy!" When we think of a holy person, we think of someone who prays all the time or someone who never says anything mean or does anything immoral, or someone who just sings praises to God all day long. This is not what holy means. The word, "holy," means to belong to God, to be set apart for God. We are holy because God has set us apart and claimed us as God's people. We are God's people. We are set apart for God, therefore we are a holy people who choose to gather to worship our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We, as the gathered people of God, are a holy church. Peter stated that we are a chosen people. We are priests or ministers. We are to be holy (1 Peter 2:9-10). However, we are not to see ourselves as better than those who aren't in the church. These folks are holy, too. God has chosen them, too. They just don't know it yet. We are all set apart to discern God's purpose for us and then we are to work to fulfill God's purpose.

**Catholic** (with a small "c"): This is a word some Protestants would like to have taken out of the Creed. In this context, the word, catholic, doesn't refer to the particular branch or denomination called the Roman Catholic Church. This branch of the church derived its name from the original meaning of the word, catholic. The Greek origin of the word comes from two words, *kata*, and *holos*. *Kata* means whole, and *holos* means universal. Up until 1054, there was one universal church, one whole church which consisted of people from different cultures, languages, ethnicities, and worship styles. In 1054 the one church split in two: The Western Church which is called the Catholic Church and the Eastern Church which is called the Orthodox Church. Since this time there have been many divisions in the universal church until we look like a broken mirror with its many shards. However, we are still one universal church in that we all claim Jesus to be our Lord and Savior despite our differences in theology. Even a broken mirror can reflect an image, albeit pieces of one image. The image that we are to reflect as the church is the image of Christ.

**Church:** We use this phrase, "I am going to church" which means we are going to a particular building in a particular location that is set aside as a gathering place for worship, a place where we learn how to be a follower of Jesus, a place for mission and fellowship. But the building is not the church. The church is both the people that gather here and the people who scatter from here into the world. We are the church. We are people who are imperfect, broken, messed up, who say and do the wrong things from time to time, yet we are a people who know we are in need of and want to receive the grace of God to heal us and make us whole. We are not a country club filled with perfect people. We are a hospital which cares for broken and hurting people.

In the New Testament two words are used for church, *ekklesia*, and *kuriakon*. The word, *ekklesia*, means called out to gather or assemble. The Spanish word for church, *iglesia*, comes from *ekklesia*. The word, *kuriakon*, means belonging to the Lord. Derived from this word is the German word for church, *kirche*, the Scottish word, *kirk*, and our English word, *church*. Both these two definitions, called out and belonging to the Lord, take us right back to the meaning of holy. The church is a people who are called out to belong to the Lord. When Jesus said that Peter would be the Rock in which "my church" will be built (Matthew 16:18), Jesus claimed the church. The church belongs to Jesus, not any individuals, or families, or pastors, or even

denominations. The church belongs to Jesus. We as Christ's Church are called out to belong to Jesus. Our mission is to discern His will for the church and then do it.

The church is also a community in which we welcome people so they feel that they belong. Everyone needs a place to belong, a place where we are accepted, "just as I am," a place where we are cared for and where we can care for others, a place where we can be encouraged and challenged, a place where we can serve and make a difference. The church is a community of faith where we can grow spiritually and become the people God wants us to become. The church can pray with us and for us. And the church can give our lives a structure of holiness and connection with God. The church is a place for redemption and transformation. None of us are perfect people but we are moving onto being made perfect in Christ's love. Because we are imperfect people, we can get hurt by what someone says or does; or doesn't say or do what we think they should say or do. Or the pastor says or does something that upsets someone. Pastors are imperfect people, too. We, as the church, may not all agree on theology or politics or even the color of one's hair or what we wear, but we can agree to accept each other and love each other. However, there are some who can't accept the differences and they leave the community of faith. Another image of the church is we are a family. Paul called the church, a household of faith (Galatians 6:10). People who live in a household are called family. The church is a family, brothers and sisters in Christ. And siblings do squabble and fight. Most of the time they make up and have each other's backs because they are family. As a church family we are called to forgive each other because we are bound together by our faith in Christ and we work together to live out our faith in the world. We are Christ's church and family who care for each other in times of crisis and need; and in times of joy and celebration.

Another way of describing the church is that we are the Body of Christ. Paul explains this concept in Corinthians. He begins by saying, we are all baptized into Christ's Body. However, each of us is a different part of the body. Each has a special role to play. Some may be the eyes of Christ, seeing where the needs are in the world. Some may be the brain, thinking how to meet the needs. Some may be the ears who listen to another's pain. Some may be the heart who feel what others are feeling. Some may be the hands that heal and help. Some may be the feet that go to do the work. Some may be the voice to share the message or speak out against an injustice. And just like a body, when one area hurts, the whole body hurts, so we all respond to heal the hurt. When have you experienced this church as a community, as a family, as the Body of Christ? What took place? When have we failed to be the church? What can we do to further the mission of Christ's church?

And last, the Communion of Saints. On the first Sunday of November we celebrate All Saints' Day with communion and remember those who have gone before us. When we refer to saints we are not referring to the canonized Saints of the Catholic church. We are referring to ordinary people who allow the Holy Spirit to work through them to fulfill Christ's purposes in the world. The words, saint and holy, come from the same Latin word, *sanctus*. Saints are people who are set apart by God to serve. Saints are people like you and me who might donate blood, crochet a prayer shawl, raise a Hero dog, mow the lawn for someone, serve in a soup kitchen, fix a toilet for someone, seek to be good stewards of the earth's resources, visit someone who is sick, protest an injustice, and/or work for justice. Can you think of other examples? Saints do good. They avoid evil, and find ways to stay connected to Christ. They can be people who are alive or people who have received their heavenly reward. The letter to the Hebrews gives us a glimpse of the "saints above" as Charles Wesley coined them. The writer of Hebrews calls these saints, the Cloud of Witnesses. Today we store and retrieve a lot of information in the "cloud" whatever that is and where ever it is. The Cloud of Witnesses wherever they are consists of those who have died and now cheer us on as we run this race. I imagine them in the stands like at a track meet. As we run the race and grow weary, they cheer us on to encourage us to remain faithful and finish. Together the saints above and the saints below commune together as we worship God. Who are the saints above who worship with us every Sunday, or every day? Who are the saints who cheer us on?

The creation of the church as the community of faith, the family of God, the Body of Christ, and the Communion of Saints is the work of the Holy Spirit. Could this be why this phrase is listed after the Holy Spirit? I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. Amen.

**Resources:** *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why* by Adam Hamilton

