

Foundations 10: I Believe in ...the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints

March 20, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

1 Corinthians 12:27-31

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

And then Paul goes on to write in 1 Corinthians 13 about how love needs to be at the root of all the spiritual gifts.

We are continuing our series on the twelve statements of the Apostles' Creed, which has formed in summary for almost 2000 years the foundation of why we Christians believe what we believe. Each statement is based on Scripture. This week we will focus on the statement, **I Believe in ...the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints.**

One of the first things that throws people off when we say this part of the creed is the word "catholic." Note that it doesn't say, "Roman Catholic Church." The word "catholic" actually means universal. The confusion in the language was to just such an extent that there is usually a footnote to the Apostle's Creed to that effect. When we say we believe in the holy, catholic church, we mean that we believe that the church is universal, worldwide, and that no one denomination has the corner on God. The church is not meant to be and was never meant to be something of a individualistic endeavor. This statement of the creed is emphasizing the communal nature, the common nature we all share, with other members of the church.

As Paul the apostle wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, the church consists of members just like the human body consists of different members or parts. The human body was intended to be equipped with different parts – eyes, nose, ears, mouth, hands, feet, and so on – and each different part of the body serves a purpose that the other parts of the body were not intended to do.

One of the activities youth group leaders would sometimes do is to challenge the youth to eat spaghetti that was served to them, but they could not use the knives, forks or

spoons that the average person might use to eat spaghetti. Instead they were given spatulas, whisks, beaters, chopsticks, potato mashers, perhaps even a meat tenderizer. And then told to have at it. They could get really creative, very messy, and generally have a lot of fun. But it just wasn't very practical to use certain tools when others would have worked much better. Likewise, the church consists of different people with different skills and talents with different outlooks on life. Sometimes we don't always get along, but we are always running in the deficit if we are missing the people who would be better suited for the different mission and ministries of the church. Things still get done – and we may have to be creative to accomplish that – but the church is meant to be a place of diversity. That's part of what makes it so fun.

So often when people talk about church, they are referencing the building. They may say something like, "We go to such-and-such a church." When in actuality the church is the people, and we should be saying things like, "I am part of such-and-such church."

Thus, when we have members join the church or when we have a baptism, we are not connecting them to a building. We are bringing new people into the one catholic, universal, worldwide community of believers who affirm what the Apostles' Creed says. We become part of the Christian community all throughout the world.

There was the old joke about St. Peter giving a tour of heaven to the newcomer. St. Peter was pointing out the different rooms that the different members of various denominations were located. "The Roman Catholics are in that room. The Methodists are in that room. The Baptists are in that room." And so on and so forth. But when they got to one particular room, St. Peter told the newcomer to walk past very quietly. When the newcomer asked why, St. Peter responded, "That's the room for the Independents. And they think they're the only ones up here."

There's a lot of theological liberties taken with that old joke, particularly when we won't be separated by denomination in heaven. There will be no such barriers when God creates the new heaven and the new earth. We will all be as one.

This statement of the Apostle's Creed also references that the church is "holy." Holy literally means, "set apart to God." We may also use the terms sanctified or hallowed, which means the same thing. Being holy is a lifelong pursuit for those who call themselves followers of Christ. You see, some people only pay attention to the first part of the gospel. The first part of the gospel is that we realize that we are sinners, that we do wrong things in our lives, and that we are powerless to do anything about it. We need to depend on the grace and mercy of our Father in heaven, who sent his Son Jesus Christ to die as a sacrifice for our sins. Through his suffering and through his rising again from the dead, we are granted eternal life as a gift. That's the first part of the gospel and, unfortunately for many people, no one has shared the good news with them beyond that point. The second part of the gospel is that God has called us to be

more holy. Once we give our lives to Christ, and accept him as our Lord and Savior, that's not the end of our journey with Christ. It is the mark of our beginning of our journey with Christ. We spend the rest of our lives drawing closer to God by practicing certain spiritual disciplines and doing all that we can, through the grace of God, to do what is pleasing to our God.

The spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting, reading our Scriptures, forgiving others as we would like to be forgiven, expressing love to our neighbors as we are to love ourselves, and so on, are not to gain favor with God so we can earn our way into heaven. They are means by which we express our love to God who first loved us and who continues to love us from now until eternity.

Striving to become more holy is a part of our Wesleyan heritage. John Wesley's emphasis on having small groups, which he called class meetings and band meetings, where followers of Christ held each other accountable in their walk of faith. Becoming more holy is the second half of the gospel, a drawing closer to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, which lasts our whole life long.

The second part of today's statement in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the communion of saints," is also based on the understanding that we are the church as a community. Saints are a part of the church – past, present, and future.

What is a saint? Some people believe it applies only to those who are dead. Some believe it applies only to those who have been exceptional in their walk of faith, or have been canonized by a denomination, such as St. Teresa of Calcutta or St. Patrick. [Here I went into a brief history of St. Patrick, based on what I learned at <https://www.history.com/topics/st-patricks-day/who-was-saint-patrick>]

Some believe it applies to all followers of Jesus Christ. Here's how the United Methodist Church has defined what it means to be a saint:

We recognize Matthew, Paul, John, Luke and other early followers of Jesus as saints, and countless numbers of United Methodist churches are named after these saints.

We also recognize and celebrate All Saints' Day (Nov. 1) and "all the saints who from their labors rest. "All Saints' Day is a time to remember Christians of every time and place, honoring those who lived faithfully and shared their faith with us. On All Saints' Day, many churches read the names of their members who died in the past year.

However, our denomination does not have any system whereby people are elected to sainthood. We do not pray to saints, nor do we believe they serve as mediators to

God. United Methodists believe "... there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5-6a).

United Methodists call people "saints" because they exemplified the Christian life. In this sense, every Christian can be considered a saint.¹

Tony Campolo has been known to open his sermons and lectures by saying, "Good morning saints!" And people chuckle and say "Good morning back to him. Then Tony says, "Good morning, sinners!" And he is usually met with a moment of silence, before someone gets what he is trying to do and then chuckles at that as well. We are both saints and sinners. We are sinners in need of salvation according to God's grace. We are saints who are striving to deepen our relationship with God and make advances in our walk of discipleship. And the best part is, we are not doing it alone, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses: followers of Jesus here and now who walk beside us, encouraging and strengthening us with their prayers, love and support. And we are surrounded by the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us to prepare the way for us and ones we will rejoin one day when we go to commune with God and with other disciples of Jesus for eternity.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-do-united-methodists-believe-in-saints>