8-23-20 Sermon “This I Believe…”

As a pastor, over the course of a career you see a lot of stained glass windows. In most churches, the stained glass windows depict events in the life of Jesus, portray classic and favorite stories from the Old Testament, or perhaps present moments in the history of the church at large or in that particular congregation. You see large, soaring windows in subtle hues, such as the ones in our sanctuary, or there are the small, almost porthole sized windows in the style of mandalas of different colors in the worship space, such as those in the sanctuary at Scioto Ridge United Methodist over in the Hilliard area. At the other end of that spectrum, there are great windows such as this one at Adam Hamilton’s church in Kansas City, Kansas, that depicts the entire biblical story. To understand the size of this window, each of those individual panels you see there is six feet tall and four feet wide. This window is HUGE! When I was in seminary at MTSO in Delaware, I got to see this beautiful window in the Centrum each week, where the afternoon sun would shine through and cast these vibrant colors on the walls and floors as we gathered for worship or for an event. The very first church I served, St. Andrew UMC down in the Easton area on Stelzer Road, had this diamond shaped window at the east end of the sanctuary, where the morning sun would shine through during worship. The church was built in the late 1960s or early 1970s; below the image of the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, note the presence, on the left side of the window, of the depiction of soldiers clad in a khaki green, that balances the images of the twelve disciples on the right hand side in shades of blue and violet. This window reflects the events going on in the world at the time the church’s founding.

The last church I served, Crossroads UMC on the west side, had a collection of modernist stained glass windows that look almost like mosaics, with big chunky pieces of what appears to be broken shards of different color glass pieced together to form beautiful images of the nativity, communion and the Holy Spirit, among other things. I always liked those windows in particular because I like more abstract, modernist art, I like bold colors, and I like the message that these windows presented of something beautiful being created out of what appears to be brokenness. I think that is a fitting description both for most Christians and for the holy catholic church.

The first three parts of the Apostles’ Creed that we’ve talked about express orthodox Christian thought belief about God - what we call *theology*, about Jesus - *Christology*, and The Holy Spirit - *Pneumatology*. The final part of the Creed recites a list of other aspects of Christian belief pertaining to the church - *Ecclesiology,* beginning with the line that often throws people off, *the holy catholic church.* So let’s break this one down a little bit.

We all believe, to one degree or another, in the church, or we wouldn’t be here. Some might say they don’t like “the institutional church,” or they don’t like “organized religion,” but that’s when I typically offer that I don’t care much for “organized religion” either, that’s why I’m a Methodist - we’re often not terribly organized. But it’s the word *catholic,* with a small “c” that is often at the center of confusion or concern for people in the Creed, mistaking that use of the word for the large “C” Roman Catholic Church. The word *catholic,* as the asterisk that almost always adorns the word in the creed, means simply something like “complete, whole, universal, or united.” And again, the idea of a “united” church might give us reason to snicker - the church is a lot of things, but united would certainly not be one of them. With thousands of different denomination on the Protestant side of the church who different in everything from interpretation of scripture to who can lead worship, teach, or be baptized, ordained, or married, the church is anything but united. Even the idea of the church as “universal” requires a bit of a consideration when we think about it. We often understand this universality to mean that the church is found everywhere in the world as opposed to small groups or sects that are only found locally. But, as Justo Gonzalez suggests, it’s universality is equally drawn from the fact that people from all around the world are part of the church, bringing a wide variety of inputs and influences, customs, practices, and beliefs that marks the universality of the church. Added to that, as James Howell offers, this idea of universality, catholicity, or unity is also an aspirational statement, something that we seek, hope for, and work toward - a unity that is found in Jesus Christ. Perhaps that is how we might think about the church being small “c” catholic.

Rather than the catholicity of the church, though, it is the idea of the church as *holy* that should make us think more deeply. What is it that we mean when we say something is *holy*? As Gonzalez pondered this question, he suggested, “If we mean that it is morally spotless, this is of all the clauses in the creed the most difficult to believe! We have all seen much - and done much - that shows that the church is not pure and unblemished.”[[1]](#footnote-2) And adding to that, Howell says that the church can sometimes be “an embarrassing caricature of itself.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Holiness in the church, he offers, is more something that we pray to achieve or strive for, not something that describes our current state.

Gonzalez, though, offers a lens through which to view this idea of holiness in the church that I found helpful when I read it.

“To help us better understand this idea, think of the phrase *Holy Land.* It certainly is not a land of moral perfection, where all love each other as they should. Nor is it a land of peace. Yet we call it *holy*, because in so designating it we remind ourselves that it is not only a land of war, terrorism, and hatred, but also the land where it has pleased God to come to us most clearly.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

And he points out that the holiness of this land is tied directly to its being where Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Isaac, Joseph, the Prophets, and finally Jesus and his first followers experienced the presence of God, where God chose to reveal God’s self to them. And he says, “All of this does not make it particularly pure, and on the contrary, it makes it's constant history of war and hatred even more tragic. But it does make it holy.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Likewise with the church. The church is not holy because it is morally pure, without fault or unblemished, it’s holy because it’s in the church that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has sent forth disciples to share the Good News of the Gospel, to heal the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, restore sight to the blind, and proclaim release to the captives - wherever and whoever they may be. Our origin is *holy*, our mission is *holy*, even if our actions and attitudes sometimes are not. That is the holy catholic church in which I believe.

*The communion of saints* speaks to many of us most acutely right now, as we find ourselves isolated and insulated from one another, partly because of pandemic and partly because of the self-imposed silos we so often place ourselves in based on economic, political, racial, educational or other criteria. We watch and read news from sources that only affirm what we already believe, we live in neighborhoods filled with people whose socio-economic status reflects our own, as does their skin color and educational levels. When we think of the communion of saints we often think of people who are just like us. And while that thinking isn’t wrong, it is incomplete.

“In the Latin text, [the words] c*ommunio sanctorum,* have more than one meeting. *Communio* may mean fellowship, but it also means sharing. In such cases, an English translation would be the “sharing of the Saints,” and the phrase would seem to refer to the sharing of goods described in The Book of Acts and practiced in varying degrees by the early church. At the time when this phrase was added to the creed, such sharing had all but disappeared and continued almost exclusively in monastic communities. Thus, the phrase could have been an attempt by monastics to call others to the level of sharing of earlier times.

“*Sanctorum* may mean “of the Saints,” as most of us usually understand it, or “of holy things.” In the latter case the phrase refers to the sharing of holy things, particularly at the sacrament of holy communion.

“Most likely, the original meaning of the phrase involved aspects of all of these. If so, when we affirm the communion of saints we are affirming: 1) our fellowship with believers of all times and places; 2) our readiness to share with others who are in need; and 3) that our sharing includes holy things – in other words, that the holy things do not belong to some of us in particular, but to all of us as a whole.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

More than just this though, we live in a 21st century society where, as Howell points out, “many people believe they can be Christian without the church; some like to argue, I can be a better Christian without the church. I have enough problems, and friction, without piling on the nonsense of church folk.”

Then Howell asks of us the really deep-seated questions that, in this time of pandemic, seem all the more poignant. “Aren't we in our culture a lonely people? Aren’t we, in fact, the loneliest people who have ever walked across the stage of life on this planet?”[[6]](#footnote-7) And he says that people who open up to him - in his role as a pastor and a counselor - admit to an acute loneliness. And he says this loneliness isn’t sated simply by having a good time or being around people - it’s deeper than that. “The only deep healing is a connection with God, and the connection with other people who want to go deep into their hearts, and the subject never touched at the water cooler or the football stadium. We are unfathomably desperate to know, and to be known, to love and to be loved, to let the fingers of my soul be intertwined with the fingers of yours, and we help one another toward God.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

This, more than the kind of remembering we do of those who have gone before us on All Saints Sunday, is what we mean when we confess our belief in the communion of saints.

When we get to the line about believing in the *forgiveness of sins,* we find overlap between the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, where we pray for God to forgive us our *sins,* our *debts*, or in our version of the Prayer, our *trespasses*, as we forgive those who *trespass* against us. Here is where a pastor might be accused of playing verbal gymnastics, but let’s try this anyway. In the Lord’s Prayer, the line *As we forgive those who trespass against us,* could be understand as “in the same way that” we forgive, or “to the same degree that we forgive,” but it can also be interpreted to mean, “forgive us our trespasses IF we forgive those who trespass against us.” Very similar, but also distinctly different meanings.

At the same time, confessing that we believe in the forgiveness of sins begs the questions, “whose sins?” and “forgiveness by whom?” We **all** believe God forgives sins - that’s part of God’s job, right? - regardless of whether we believe God will forgive somebody else’s sins or whether God will forgive our sins. But if our belief is that Hitler’s sins, or Saddam Hussein’s sins, or Osama bin Laden’s sins, are unforgivable by God, or if we believe that something **we** have done could never be forgiven - then we don’t really believe in the forgiveness of sins. *Forgiveness* is either available to everybody, or it’s available to nobody.

As Gonzalez writes, however, “to affirm the forgiveness of sins is to affirm that we ourselves have been forgiven. Coming immediately after the *holy catholic church* and the *communion of saints,* it means that those of us who received these words are part of the church because we are forgiven. We declare the forgiveness of sin because without such forgiveness we would not be here, we would not be confessing this faith, we would not be part of this community.”[[8]](#footnote-9)The holy catholic church - this earthly communion of saints - is, more than anything else, the gathering of forgiven people - not perfect people, but forgiven (and forgiving) people.

Howell goes further in talking about forgiveness. “To affirm the forgiveness of sin is to affirm also the forgiveness of the sins of others. There is a connection between the two. Jesus put it bluntly in his explanation of the Lords Prayer…[where] he commented, ‘for if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses’ (Matthew 6:14-15). At first, these words seem to imply a sort of transaction: if you forgive others, God will forgive you. But the matter is much deeper. Often the reason we do not forgive others is that we ourselves are not convinced that we are forgiven. We may feel that we have done nothing that requires forgiveness.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

He then offers, that “on our side, we frankly don’t think we need much forgiveness. We are so practiced at self-justification, and rationalizing, and explaining. We feel entitled. I am owed a good life, and if I don’t it I get busy blaming somebody.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Or as Gonzalez concludes, “we may have such a sense of guilt that we can cling to our own self-worth only by considering ourselves better than those whom we refuse to forgive. In either case, we are not ready to accept God's forgiveness. Our own non-forgiving attitude [renders] us incapable of being forgiven!”[[11]](#footnote-12)

It was Martin Luther King, Jr, though, who perhaps gives us the most shrewd advice on forgiveness when he suggested that “love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up.”[[12]](#footnote-13) And it was in the letter called 1 John, that we are told that it is God who is love.

To some, saying in a Christian context that we believe in the resurrection of the body seems like a moot point, *of course we believe in the resurrection - Jesus was resurrected!* But the meaning here is more than just belief in Jesus’ resurrection. Even before Jesus’ ministry began, the Pharisees believed and preached the resurrection of the body, although the Sadducees did not believe this. Early Christian theology, then, affirmed Jesus’ resurrection as the “first fruits,” that is, the first of what would become the large scale resurrection of the bodies of all who have died at the final judgment. And the Apostle Paul raised the idea of Christ, and of us, being resurrected in a spiritual body as opposed necessarily to our current body. I don’t know about you - but I’m hoping to do a little better next time around!

But if you’ll remember back to week one of this series, I shared with you that one of the reasons for the development of the Creed in the first place was as a counter to some of the heretical beliefs that were developing in the first centuries of Christianity, most particularly what was called Marcionism. Because Marcion and his followers believed that all things material, including human flesh, were evil and thus that Jesus was not really a human but only appeared to be human, it naturally followed that since they believed that the physical world was not part of God the Father’s Creation or part of the divine purpose but was an obstacle to it, salvation could have nothing to do with the flesh or the material. Jesus, they said, who was not really flesh and only appeared to have a human body, would not be resurrected into a material body, and neither would we. It was “over against such teachings,” Gonzalez instructs, “that the church declared its hope [its belief] for the resurrection of the material body.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

And finally, *life everlasting.* This is not a measure of time, as some would believe. It’s not about the afterlife in the sense of heaven or hell. *Life everlasting* speaks to the life we live in God, both now and in the future. *Life everlasting,* like the *living water* that Jesus offered to the woman at the well, is about the quality of relationship, the nature of relationship, that we have with God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit. It’s about what guides and defines our life and our relationships - are we guided by anger and fear, by death and destruction, or are we shaped and molded by love, and forgiveness, and hope, and generosity, and community, and faith. *Life everlasting* is that life that brings to us and reveals in us the peace of God and the love of God found in all of God’s creation and celebrated and made most real to us as Christians in the person of Jesus Christ.

But, in conclusion, understand that this belief is also tied to the one before, *the resurrection of the body.* As Gonzalez offers, “the life for which we hope is life in the body. The life we affirm is life in the body. And, as believers in this final resurrection and this life everlasting, we now live in love and respect for these bodies that are called to rise again on that joyful day! Until then, joining countless believers throughout the world and through the ages, we dare live as those who can truly declare:[[14]](#footnote-15)

I believe in God, the Father almighty,

creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,

was crucified, died, and was buried;

he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church,

the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,

the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.

So be it. Amen.

1. Gonzalez, Justo, *The Apostles’ Creed for Today,* 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Howell, James C., *The Life We Claim,* 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Gonzalez, 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Gonzalez, 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Gonzalez, 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Howell, 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Howell, 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Gonzalez, 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Gonzalez, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Howell, 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Gonzalez, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. King, Jr., Martin Luther, “Strength to Love,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.,* edited by James Melvin Washington, (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), 61> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Gonzalez, 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Gonzalez, 91 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)