

Credo: I Believe in the Church

February 6, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Romans 12:3-18

So, for those of you who haven't been with us for the last few weeks, we are in the middle of a sermon series titled "Credo" – a look at the basics of what we believe as children of God, as demonstrated through the words of the Apostles' Creed. And today, as we continue our exploration into our core beliefs, we are moving into the "nuts and bolts" section of the Creed. For the last three weeks we have been exploring the lion's share of what the creed has to offer – the nature of who God is. God Almighty. God as Father; as creator; as the source of all being. God the Son – Jesus Christ, the God who becomes incarnate among us; who teaches us and heals us and dwells with us and lives as one of us so that he might redeem us. And then last week, God the Holy Spirit. God who dwells within us. God who is always and forever about the work of sustaining us and companioning us and drawing us closer and closer to the heart of God.

So, after all that, it would be easy for us to brush off our hands on our aprons and say "Okay, that's done! That pretty much sums it all up."

But even though we have already talked through the lion's share of the creed, we are *far* from done. And in fact, we are only just getting started.

So for the rest of this series, we are going to be hanging out in the third and last paragraph of the Apostles' Creed – the section that we kicked off last week. And here's how that section goes:

*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 today, we are going to turn to what is probably the most commonly-misunderstood line of the creed. It's not a line that's prompted heresies and schisms, per se, but it is the only line in the creed that in our hymnals gets an asterisk. Meaning, this line needs a little bit more explanation.

I believe in the holy catholic church.

Now, I am not going to ask you how many of you bristle a little bit when you hear those words. I believe in the holy catholic church. Because I'm willing to bet that what jumps to mind for most, if not all, of us, is the Roman Catholic Church. Big-C Catholic. And even

if we've been through Confirmation classes, or studied the Creed in some other context, or we've read the fine print at the bottom of the Creed, and we know on an intellectual level that here we are not talking about big-C Roman Catholic but instead little-c catholic which more accurately translates "universal," we still live in a world and a culture and a time in which the words that we choose to use tend to get a little bit polarizing. And sometimes they can come with some baggage.

And I'm guessing that for most of us, just the mention of the word "catholic" brings to mind a bunch of images.

Now, I'm still pretty new to Pennsylvania. And I'm still getting a feel for the landscape of Christianity here in this area. I know that this state is shaped largely by our German ancestors, and so our Lutheran roots and also our Anabaptist roots go really deep. There's a reason there's a little Lutheran church in just about every small town. And that's also why the Mennonite and Amish communities are so pronounced.

But as you know, I am from New Mexico. And New Mexico was not settled by German pacifists. New Mexico was invaded by the Spanish Conquistadors, who forced a militant version of Catholicism on the Natives who lived there. And to this day, almost 500 years later, there is this weird dynamic where I come from, where the Catholic church is still the dominant religious group in that area, except that it has now been surpassed by an even larger group: former Catholics.

In conversations that I have had with a lot of you, I know that some of you are Catholic; some of you grew up Catholic but aren't anymore; some of you have worshipped in a Catholic church, or attended a Catholic wedding and have walked away baffled; and still others of you have never set foot in a Catholic church and have zero intention of ever doing so.

So, let's talk about this word "catholic" and where it comes from.

Last week, when we were talking about the Holy Spirit, I jumped into a little bit of church history (because...that's what I do). And I told the story (badly) of what happened in the year 1054 A.D. Prior to that year, there was only one church. THE church. There were congregations and communities all over the place, and there were disagreements and factions among them, but when it got right down to it, I think that they would pretty much all agree that even though there were differences, at their core, they agreed on the essentials. And therefore, they were in community with one another. Despite language barriers; physical or national boundaries; minor (and sometimes major) differences in belief – a Christ follower was a Christ follower, plain and simple.

But over time, differences in culture and worldview became more pronounced. The church in the East began to have this strong feeling that the church in the West was leaving them behind. And making decisions without consulting them first. And that all

came to a head in 1054 when the Western church decided to add three words to the Nicene Creed, without first running it past their brothers and sisters in the East.

And so that led to “the Great Schism.” And, for the first time, we had not one universal church, but two churches. The “Orthodox” church – orthodox meaning, “right belief” – and the “Catholic” church – meaning, “universal.” I have to laugh a little bit at the names they gave themselves. The Western church essentially saying, “we are universal. We are the only true church. Nobody else really even exists at all.” And the Eastern church saying “we are right. We alone hold the truth. All those other guys – they are misguided and not worth our time.”

And then, 500 years later, the Catholic church split again, into Catholic and Protestant. And then, it wasn't long before Protestant churches began to split and divide and split again and merge and reproduce like bunnies, until now we don't have one universal church at all. Or two. Or three. Right now it is estimated that there are more than 45,000 Christian denominations worldwide.

45,000. That is insane.

Although in today's society that kinda makes a lot of sense, when you figure you can put three different people in one room and somehow manage to have seven different opinions. It is absolutely bonkers just how wildly-divided we have become.

So in a way, this line from the Apostles' Creed is not a descriptor. It's a prayer. It's a prayer that God would mend what is broken and fractured and fragmented. It's a prayer that even though we may believe 45 thousand (or even 45 million) different things, that we would be drawn together by that which unites us. A prayer that even in the midst of our disagreements, and our squabbles, and our fundamental differences in worldview, we would be able to come together in a place of love.

In his sermon titled *Catholic Spirit*, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote this: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.”

And that is what brings us to our scripture reading for today.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul is essentially writing his own “credo,” of sorts. Outlining, in a not-very-concise way, the most essential things about what he believes. And here in chapter 12, he gets to his thoughts on the church. The body of Christ. The people who call themselves Christian. People like you, and like me. People who are kindhearted, and well-intentioned, and generally good people, but people who are also...well...people. People who try hard but sometimes get it wrong. People who are easily swayed by strong personalities. People who have different opinions and don't shy away from expressing those opinions, and not always in the most helpful ways. People

who let our egos get in the way; people who act out of our brokenness; people who forget who we are and who we serve.

“Don’t forget,” Paul tells the church, “that you belong to one another. This is not an every man and every woman for herself kind of game. In the body of Christ, if one hurts, we all hurt. If one breaks, we all break. If one shines, we all shine. And we all need one another. We are incomplete without one another. Because each and every one of us has different gifts. Without you, the body is not complete. Without me, the body doesn’t function as well. Without *all* of us coming together and bringing our uniqueness and our differences and our perspectives and our talents and our different ways of seeing and looking at and experiencing the world, we would not be complete.

Differences are good. Differences are necessary. Differences make us whole.

But differences also lead to miscommunication and conflict. And so, Paul spends the whole next section talking about what it looks like to love in the face of differences.

And spoiler alert: Paul never tells us that love means we all have to think the same things. Love doesn’t mean that we have to agree on everything. Or even on most things. But love does mean that even through our differences we stay committed to God, and committed to one another. Love means that we hold fast to what we know and believe to be true, but we don’t use that as an excuse to mistreat or push away those who think differently. On the contrary, love means that we are always looking for opportunities to lift one another up.

“Outdo one another in showing honor,” Paul writes.

“Extend hospitality to strangers.”

“Bless those who persecute you.”

“Associate with the lowly.”

“Do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

I really love this last one because it is real and honest. Paul recognizes that sometimes this kind of love can be hard. Sometimes, we can do everything right, and it doesn’t make a lick of difference. Sometimes, we can go first in offering words of peace, and reconciliation; we can try to make things right with those who have wronged us or those we have wronged, and we can get burned.

“Their response is not up to you,” Paul is saying. “You are not responsible for the way they choose to behave. They may very well choose brokenness and pain and disconnection over peace. And that is their choice to make. But you can still choose to be a peacemaker, even if the result is not what you might envision.”

Friends, on one hand I kinda feel like I am preaching to the choir here. I have experienced through you a kind of love through an *incredibly* difficult couple of years – a love that is not found in most places. Yet at the same time, I think these words of Paul, and these words that we recite in the Apostle’s Creed, are still real and timely for all of us.

I believe in the holy catholic church. I believe in a church that is universal. A church that is not torn asunder by petty squabbles and debates and ideological differences. I believe in what the Holy Spirit created the church to be: one body, that works together; moves together; loves together; sustains one another; goes first in bringing peace and hope and love to the world.

Even though 45,000 different denominations might speak to the contrary; even though our political brokenness right now might challenge this belief; even though we as United Methodists, we as Christians, we as Americans, we as human beings might be as divided now as we have ever been at any point – certainly during my lifetime, I still believe.

I believe in a God who heals what is broken. I believe in a church that knows how to love. I believe that at our core that which unites us together is stronger than that which tears us apart. I believe that even though life is really, really hard right now, as far as it depends on me I am being called to live in peace with those in my corner of the world.

My friends, may our God of peace, our God of love, our God of healing, and our God of compassion open our hearts that we might once again be the body of Christ. The holy catholic church. Instruments of God’s peace in the world around us.

Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord make Me an instrument of Your peace
Where there is hatred let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness joy.

O Divine master grant that I may
Not so much seek to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand.
To be loved. as to love
For it's in giving that we receive
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it's in dying that we are born
To eternal life. Amen.