

## Credo II – “I believe in the . . . holy catholic church”

March 12, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year A  
(Part 2 of a Sermon Series)

Text: *“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”*

-- Ephesians 3:19-21, NRSV

Last week we began our Lenten-long look at the third article of the Apostles’ Creed with the very important words, “I believe in the Holy Ghost.” What we affirmed is that through all of our life, the Holy Spirit is a person – not a “thing”, or an “it”, or a bird, or even a “ghost” – but a person is fully God to us. Jesus promised a helper, an advocate, a comforter who would come after him and be with us forever. The Holy Spirit is that person.

We do well to remember all the occasions of our lives where we have been helped, aided, and comforted by others with human faces and remember that the work of the Holy Spirit is that real. We can image God, the Father, in parent-like ways; we can readily identify Jesus in the middle of human activity, doing things we would do; so also we need to humanize the work of the Holy Spirit in order that he can take his rightful place in our hearts as God, the Holy Spirit, where, by the way, he is interceding for us – helping us – “*with sighs too deep for words*” (Romans 8:27). . .

We turn today to the next phrase of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed; a phrase that needs emphasis on every word of it to fully understand its importance for those who affirm what it is saying: I believe . . . in the holy catholic church.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.



**Figure 1: Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler, PA (at bottom) sits beneath a composite “tree” of church images in (clockwise from top) Skåne, Sweden; Benaulim, Goa, India; Grytviken, South Georgia Island, Antarctica; Gergheti, (Nation of) Georgia; Pilbara, Western Australia; and Nikitniki, Moscow, Russia.**

In musing about this second part of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed, I cite Chaplain Richard Crocker of Dartmouth College quoting an interview with the Hindu spiritual leader, Mahatma (“Great Soul”) Gandhi: when asked, *“What do you like most about Christianity?”* he replied, *“Jesus Christ!”* Then, he was asked, *“What do you like least about Christianity?”* He replied, *“Christians.”*<sup>i</sup>

Though long gone, "Great Soul" seems to speak for many people in the current culture who have given up on organized religion . . . Many people willingly call themselves "spiritual", but they do not want to be included in a group that calls itself a church, or worse, a particular brand of church.

Yet, here we are on the brink of confessing our faith – a major commitment – that is what a creed is after all – a formal and public statement of belief:

*Credo . . . I believe . . . in the holy catholic church . . .*

Let's look at each word that builds to the whole phrase that means so much.

That we believe in a "church" is a way of saying that we do not affirm individualism – at least when it comes to our spiritual practices. Our reformed heritage is a long line of believers who have affirmed our corporate responsibility. Here these words of the founding Methodist, John Wesley, as he speaks of privatized religion:

*"Directly opposite to this [the approach of the desert mystics] is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."<sup>ii</sup>*

Always God has chosen to involve himself in people's lives in order that others may be brought to salvation and wholeness. Abraham was one man with a family through whom many nations came to be. To this day, over half of the world's 7 billion people trace their spiritual heritage to him . . . As the old vacation Bible school song goes: "Father Abraham had many (kids), many (kids) had Father Abraham; I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord!"

When we talk about God's saving purpose it has always had a corporate understanding. God is out to save a family, a people, a body, a church – even a world: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"<sup>iii</sup>

To affirm that we believe in "the church" is to make manifest God's intentional plan for the organization of his people. It is to take a step towards the reality of the Church as a group where the

Spirit is at work and dwelling – quite the opposite of the tendency of many to say that the organizational church is a dead institution.

God loves to bring people together into his body. This is the thrust of the passage from Ephesians. Paul talks about the unity of the body. Elsewhere he speaks about the function of the many parts of the body to make the whole: feet, hands, nose, ears – but Christ is the head. The belief in the goodness of the group is in the assurance that comes with the One leading the group . . . Jesus Christ is the head of the church, which is his body.

The church we believe in is holy. We know that holy means “set apart”. Let me express this concept differently: what is “holy” is what is “close to God.”<sup>iv</sup> The things that are called “holy” can be easily dismissed, and by the dismissal all the good that is in them, when we look closely at the moral shortcomings of failing to be “holy enough.” The worst mark on the report card of the church is when holy people are their most cursed . . . We fail to exemplify the holiness that God is, and that he wants from us, as we seek to lower the threshold of what is acceptable, good and true.

The word “hypocrite”<sup>v</sup> comes to mind: “hypo” – under; “crite” – from the word critic, someone who evaluates or makes judgments on people or things, or a person whose job it is to evaluate and write about what they experience.<sup>vi</sup> A hypocrite is someone who never measures up to par; who is always more critical of others than he/she is of him/herself. Truth is, we are not pure enough in ourselves, we will never be perfect this side of heaven, we are not holy as God is holy (in himself), but we believe that the church is loved by God so much that he chooses to be close to us, even when we are not as close to him as we should be. Nearness is always a matter of perspective. Those who call the church hypocritical are themselves often the farthest from the God who wishes to call them his children.

That God chooses to be close to us and thereby make us holy means, too, that our neighbor is holy also. We cannot get close to God on our own and ignore the ramifications of being close to others.

We do not live in isolation as God's children. He saves in groups; he chooses to love peoples; he calls together strangers to make them his family.

Earlier in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about how the Gentiles, once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ:

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it."*<sup>vii</sup>

Notice the movement here: from far off to close at hand – a horizontal reality made possible by a vertical action.<sup>viii</sup> The saving grace of our holiness is . . . *God's saving grace in Jesus Christ*. God's institutional plan of salvation (the Church) is holy because in Jesus it is made so. And though we may stumble around and fret ourselves in the muck and mire of "the world that is too much with us, late and soon"<sup>ix</sup> God comes close – only a breath away, by his Spirit – and claims us for himself. As you affirm this part of the creed, how may you actively bless God's belief in your holiness to him by being holy in how you live and the choices you make and in the deeds you do? How might you better reflect God's holiness as you live into being a member of his church?

Finally, this holy church is a "catholic" church. We Protestants get leery of the "C" word, but we do so from ignorance. Hear these words from the Rev. Stephen Hoffman:

*". . . (T)he church is 'catholic' with a small 'c.' 'Catholic' here is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. It is often said that this word means 'universal' and it is referring to the universal presence of the church. That is partly true, but 'catholic' also means 'according to the whole' so what makes the church catholic is that people from everywhere make a contribution to it and are a part of it. When we hear of a variety of worship styles and a variety of beliefs of people calling themselves Christians that is not a threat to the church, it is a necessary sign of the church's integrity."*

At the beginning of this sermon, we saw a number of pictures of churches from around the globe, arranged like a tree with Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, PA at the trunk level and all the

others branching off from there . . . all those churches have "Trinity" in their names; some are Roman Catholic, one is Lutheran, another is Anglican, some are Russian or Greek Orthodox – but all are Trinity churches – each providing different worship styles, many different ways to pray, or sing, or to bear witness to the Word of God at work in them – each one a particular part of a universal whole!

Prior to praying for the unity of his disciples, Jesus commanded them to love one another: *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*<sup>x</sup> This is what we profess and affirm when we say we believe in a holy church that is also "catholic". We should embrace this word, coupled as it is to "holy" and "church". Together these words are a great phrase that has power and influence in the world for God's good love, the way salt and leaven do in food.

Catholicity means that no matter what our differences are, we love and care for one another. Rather than let the differences between us divide us, or cause us to be critical of our hypocrisy, let the love we have, despite our differences, begin to reflect the many facets of who we are as God's unique treasure. Such diversity that can come together is a very able sign that we are one. That was Christ's prayer for his own . . . his prayer for us his holy catholic church (see John 17:20-26).

Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian author, preacher and farmer once said the following in defining the word "denominations":

*". . . There's no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for differences, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the Church would like more like the Kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess."*<sup>xi</sup>

(I quote Stephen Hoffman in closing:) *"That's the main point of this affirmation. The church is a building whose founder and maker is God, whose cornerstone/keystone is Jesus Christ. It is his holy catholic church and it can never fail because by the Holy Spirit"* – the very one we profess to believe in to

start this sentence – *“is always sustaining it, through thick and thin, in season and out, in the darkest hour towards the dawn of the day that is the glorious resurrection.”*<sup>xii</sup> . . . First for Jesus, then for all who call upon him in faith.

We believe that *“in life and death we belong to God. We are his people for all time in all places who call upon him, his holy catholic church . . . ‘One great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.’”*<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> See Dean Richard Crocker at <http://dartmouthchaplain.blogspot.com/2012/10/christianitys-unique-claim-richard-r.html>

<sup>ii</sup> See John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley Volume XIV* p321 preface to poetical works; Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>iii</sup> John 3:16, NRSV (and see iv, below)

<sup>iv</sup> This is based on an idea expressed in a sermon by Rev. Stephen Hoffman, formerly of the First United Methodist Church; Palmetto, Florida.

<sup>v</sup> In Greek theatre, the term was used to describe what an actor does and is made up of two different words: “an interpreter from underneath”. Greek actors wore masks, so the performance came from “underneath”, literally. See more at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/hypocrite-meaning-origin>.

<sup>vi</sup> Word definition is from <http://www.yourdictionary.com/critic>.

<sup>vii</sup> Ephesians 2:13-16, NRSV

<sup>viii</sup> Stephen Hoffman.

<sup>ix</sup> This is the title line of a poem by William Wordsworth, 1806. See <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww317.html>.

<sup>x</sup> John 13:34-35, NRSV

<sup>xi</sup> The quote is from Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, p. 35.

<sup>xii</sup> Stephen Hoffman.

<sup>xiii</sup> Stephen Hoffman, including quoting a portion of the hymn by John Oxenham, “In Christ There is No East or West” (verse 1).