

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH
FIFTH IN SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
OCTOBER 19, 1986

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Aren't we audacious? We have a lot of nerve, a lot of daring. Those of you who consider yourselves shy, those of you who question the extent of your faith, look at what we are doing. We have come together this morning to be the church! Not only do we confess a belief in the holy catholic church, but we claim to be the holy catholic church! Talk about nerve! On the other hand, audacious and presumptuous though we may be, we are not here because of our own doing. I firmly believe God, through the Holy Spirit, and as the Holy Spirit, called you here, not only this morning, but called you to the church.

Imagine! God chose you and me. God reaches out, claims you, breaks into your life, disrupts you, disturbs you, and calls you to do something significant with your life. God calls you to come out of your self-centeredness, out of the world, to be the church. To use ancient language, God has plucked you out of the arms of the devil, saved you, protects you, so that you may be a soldier in Christ's army. Yes, the holy catholic church is the army of Christian soldiers fighting the forces of evil.

Many Protestants are uncomfortable confessing a belief in the holy catholic church. I know of a family who changed churches rather than say they believe in the holy catholic church! I know of people who remain silent when we reach that point in the creed. Others are less obvious and feel a sneeze coming on, or stop to blow their noses. Have you noticed the flags of kleenex waving? Some have feelings that aren't quite that deep, but they say, "I squirm a little every time we say that." Even after a quick explanation that the word "catholic" means "universal," they are still uncomfortable.

When we affirm belief in the holy catholic church, we believe the church that was empowered by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost--the church to which Jesus entrusted Peter with the keys, the body of Christ--has transcended time, schisms, heresies, and is still present in the world today. We affirm that where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered, there is the true church. The church is not just a biblical concept. The church is not just an ancient institution. The church is a present reality.

In other words, belief in the holy catholic church requires the audacity to believe that the church we experience is the church that has its roots in Jesus Christ. Do the folks who do not want to use the word "catholic" believe that the church began with Luther and Calvin and not with Jesus? Luther and Calvin both preached that they did not leave the catholic church, but that the Roman Catholic Church had strayed from the catholic church at that time in history. If we are not in the catholic church, how did the gospel get from the Bible to Martin Luther some 1500 years later? Does not Augustine belong to us? Is not he one of our heroes, yet he lived before the Protestant reformation? Is not St. Francis of Assisi one of us? The holy catholic church is not the exclusive property of the Roman Catholic Church. We are also the holy catholic church. We are not a schism church. We are not a church that came into existence with Luther or, two hundred years later, with John Wesley. We are not a temporary, fly-by-night affair, although too many of our members treat their church as if it were. We are the holy catholic church, the church that transcends time and schisms.

Where is the holy catholic church? Right here. Can you understand the audacity of such a belief? What is the relationship between the local church

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and the universal church? Is the holy catholic church the sum total of all local churches? Is the universal church the holy catholic church of which our local church is one part? Hans Kung in his classic, *On Being a Christian*, writes that the local church is not the universal church, but fully represents the universal church. "The local Church does not merely BELONG to the Church. The local Church IS the Church and can fully represent the cause of Jesus Christ." (Pg. 480)

We are not just part of the church. We are the church. The church is completely present here. The promise of the gospel in its entirety has been given to us. Christ is present in us. The Holy Spirit is bestowed upon us. Not just part, but all. This is an astounding claim. A small congregation of Fijians worshipping in a village is the church. The congregation of Tongans who gather this afternoon in the chapel is the church. The thousands who gather this morning in Dallas in the largest United Methodist Church in the country are the church. You and I gathered here this morning are the church.

We are the church when we gather together in the name of Jesus Christ. You and I are the church when we assemble. The New Testament meaning of the word "church" is based on Old Testament concepts and means the assembling of God's people. The emphasis is on the verb, assemble, rather than on the noun, assembly. The Bible emphasizes a dynamic, moving process, rather than a static institution or organization. Kung writes (pg. 479), "There is not a church merely because something was once instituted, founded and then remains unchanged. There is a church only as a result of a constantly new concrete event of coming together, of assembling, and especially of assembling for worship."

We often overlook that distinction and identify the church with the institution, or the denomination, or a building. We call this building the First United Methodist Church. People ask, "Where is the church?" We answer, "Corner of Hamilton and Webster." No way. This building is not the church. The denominational structure is not the church. The membership is not the church. We are the church when we gather, when we assemble, as God's people, to worship and/or to do God's work. The denomination that is most correct at this point is the Church of Christ. Have you noticed their signs which read, "The Church of Christ meets here." We who are the First United Methodist Church happen to meet in a building that is on the corner of Hamilton and Webster.

What do we do as the church? What is our task? To serve the cause of Jesus Christ. The church witnesses to the cause of Jesus Christ, beginning with itself. The cause of Jesus Christ is not only the church's reason for being, the cause of Jesus Christ is also God's judgment on the church. There are many people today who are disillusioned with the institutional church. There are several here this morning who accept Jesus but have difficulty joining the church. The church, including ours, is often arrogant, materialistic, defensive, and hypocritical. The church has often lost its identity and become a mirror of the culture. The church has often fallen prey to the devil and has been divisive, creating a situation where people have been hurt, victimized, criticized and judged.

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But, we still believe in the holy catholic church. Sometimes the Holy Spirit does indeed break through destructive or inadequate human relationships, and we become God's people. I have said many times from this pulpit that we are a group of people seeking to be the people of God. We come humbly into God's presence, confessing our brokenness, confessing our estrangement from God and from one another. We confess our sins as part of the worship of God. We are not perfect. I heard of one church who awards a humility pin to the most humble member, but if the recipient wears the humility pin, they take it away! When we gather, we admit our brokenness. Then God can forgive, renew and empower us.

As the church, we are called to serve the cause of Jesus Christ, to do God's work. We are the body of Christ. Imagine! Talk about audacity! The church is the presence of Jesus in the world--you and I! To get a clue as to what our task is, can you picture what Jesus would be doing if he came in person? The lecturer this coming Wednesday evening in Fellowship Hall is Barbara Metcalf, a remarkable person whom both Eleanor and I had the privilege of meeting this weekend. In fact, she did a spiritual portrait for each of us, which was a very moving experience. She has written a delightful book called, *For the Child in You, With Love From Rebecca*. I especially liked her insight, "When Jesus is in church, he plays with the children."

If Jesus were here this morning, he would probably be in the kindergarten room playing with the children, or holding the babies in the nursery, or he might be in the balcony gossiping and giggling with the teenagers. Jesus would probably be outside inviting the street people and the poor folks to come in. If Jesus were here in person, church would be a happy place filled with all kinds of folks. Church is where you can feel at home. When we get beyond the doctrinal differences, the rules, the pressure to conform, jealousy and competition, church is where you find a new family, God's family. Church is where you find roots, where you can relax, take off your shoes and your best behavior, where you can be yourself, where people will understand you and accept you. Church is where you can be a child again! One reason I like summer camp is because camp is a setting where we lose our inhibitions and act like kids again, where we sing, dance, play and have fun. It was the devil who got us to banish fun! What a way to defeat God: declare fun to be un-Christian and inappropriate for church! Church is where you find joy, fun, peace, and fellowship. Church is where you experience and share the love of God.

But, when we take Jesus seriously, church is not necessarily popular with the world. Jesus was crucified. Because Jesus played with children, identified with the poor and the outcasts, Jesus criticized the power structures. The church does not get involved in politics, but the church seeks to hold the government accountable to higher standards. The church is the conscience of the nation and seeks to hold the nation and the world accountable to God's laws. When we are faithful to the cause of Jesus Christ, the church is often persecuted, vilified, condemned, and sometimes crucified.

What a responsibility it is to be the body of Christ in our world today! But, what a privilege it is to be one of God's people! What a joy it is to be the church! Today is Commitment Sunday when we make a financial commitment to the cause of Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church. It takes nerve, it takes courage, to respond to God's call. It takes nerve to

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be the church. It takes nerve to be faithful. It takes nerve to commit your life to Jesus Christ. It takes courage to commit your financial resources. The church is no place for cowards, but even cowards are loved by God, saved by Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be and do even more than they thought possible.

It takes courage to be the church, and if you haven't got enough courage, rely on the Holy Spirit. Are you a tither? Will you tithe as an expression of your desire to commit your entire life, all that you are and all that you have, to Jesus Christ and to the church God has called you to be? I believe in this cause. I believe in what we are doing. I believe we are the holy catholic church, against whom the powers of hell will never prevail.