

“I Believe in the Church”

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 and John 15: 12-17

Market Square Presbyterian Church

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Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors. And see all the people.

How many of us grew up learning this simple refrain in Sunday school? While I appreciate this image of our hands forming a church and steeple filled with people, it continues the faulty definition of “church” as a building, a sanctuary where people gather once a week for worship. The “church” is not a building. The church is a gathering of God’s people across all cultures, all styles of worship, every tribe and tongue and nation, both living and dead. The church is not a building, it is a people. We are the church.

Often when people reflect on the Apostles Creed reference to the church they stumble over the words, “holy catholic church.” If we are Protestants, why are we confessing our faith in another denomination, the Catholics? It is worth noting that the adjectives referring to the church in the creed are all lower case. We are not referring to the Roman Catholic Church with Pope and Bishops, etc. We are referring to the holy people of God all around the world. The original word for universal, all encompassing, world-wide... is “catholic” with a small “c”.

I find it interesting that this question about the word “catholic” comes mostly from those inside the church. What I want to engage today is the question of those who have left the Christian Church. Some pollsters refer to this group as De-churched. Younger generations across America are abandoning institutional religion, local congregations, and expressing their values and beliefs in no-institutional ways. Church attendance and membership have been dropping significantly throughout the 21st century. These “De-churched” are not leaving to join “Evangelical” congregations. They are simply leaving Christianity all together. Their question is much deeper. Church? What is the point? Why would I want to join a local congregation? Institutional religion is irrelevant. How does church help?

I want to reflect on this question. Why do we insist that it is right and good to believe in and participate in the “holy catholic church”? Listen to Jesus’ words in John 15.

12 *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant[b] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

There is an old story about a Presbyterian lady who was invited by her neighbor to attend an evening revival service sponsored by the “God-loving, Bible-believing, Dipped-in-the-blood, Holy Spirit-filled Revival Tabernacle.” She agreed to attend with her friend. The guest preacher revivalist stepped up to the pulpit and asked, “How many of you are God-loving, Bible-believing, Dipped-in-the-blood, Holy Spirit-filled Revival believers?” Everybody raised their hands and shouted enthusiastic A-mens. Everyone except the lone Presbyterian lady. The preacher zeroed in on her. “Ma’am, if you are not a God-loving, Bible-believing, Dipped-in-the-blood, Holy Spirit-filled Revivalist, what are you?” She responded she was a Presbyterian. The preacher asked why she was a Presbyterian. Feeling a bit defensive at being targeted she answered, “My grandparents were Presbyterians. My parents were Presbyterians. My late husband was a Presbyterian.” The preacher pushed, “Well suppose your departed loved ones had all been MORONS. What would you that have made you?” She thought for a moment and said, “Oh, I see. I guess that would have made me a God-loving, Bible-believing, Dipped-in-the-Blood, Holy spirit-filled Revivalist.”

I want to reflect on the areas where we Christians of all denominations and stripes and colors agree. Part of being a Christian is the belief we need each other and do better together than apart. Participating in a local congregation is good for us. How is it good?

George Gallup offers some interesting statistics when it comes to those who actively participate in a congregation compared with those whose values and beliefs do not involve congregational engagement. Surveys from the year 2000 showed a general trend which has only grown larger. Overall, 47% of Americans give generously of their time to non-profits. However, that number shows that about half of those involved with local congregations volunteer versus only 1/3 of those without institutional religious connections. How about donating to non-profits? 92% of church people donate regularly to charities, compared to only 66% of non-religiously affiliated.

In other words, we join a local congregation ignorer to find ways to connect and serve, we are more likely to find opportunities to give our time and money when we are with a local church. Participating in the “holy catholic church” helps us keep our faith alive and acts of blessing others. The church serves the world. What might that look like for us here at Market Square as we receive new members today?

I invite Ben Perez to the pulpit today to share how this church blessed him and has helped him.