

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 16, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: John 17:1-5, 20-24

Theme: We Believe: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic

[prayer]

Today we conclude our worship series on the Nicene Creed. We have covered a lot of theological ground in six short weeks. We began with the statement that undergirds the entire Creed: We believe in One God, who we worship in Three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We affirmed God the Father as our Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as our teacher and guide.

Finally, we arrive at the last section of the Creed:

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism

for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,

and the life of the world to come.

There is an old, self-deprecating joke among Christians that goes like this: A man is marooned on a desert island. Eventually he is rescued. His rescuers notice he built three huts out of branches and leaves. They are confused; why would he need three huts when he was all alone on the island? The man explains, “The first one is my house. The second one is my church. And the third one is the church I *used* to go to!”

We laugh, perhaps a little wryly, because we know how common this is. Many of us have switched churches at some point in our lives. Sometimes we had good reasons for leaving. Other times we did not. Part of growing as a mature disciple is learning the value of commitment and faithfulness to a local expression of the

Body of Christ. It means understanding how the Church truly is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

Every denomination has its own way of marking membership in the Church. In the United Methodist Church, in addition to baptism, members make a covenant with each other, a holy promise. We vow to denounce sin, resist evil, confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and strengthen the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. In return, the congregation vows to support, nurture, edify, and encourage us as disciples of Jesus.¹

Like marriage vows, these vows are consecrated by God. Breaking them is a serious thing. If through prayer and self-examination and consultation with our pastor we conclude that we cannot in good conscience keep our vows, or the congregation is not keeping its vow to us, then we may consider leaving a church. More often, though, people leave over issues of personal preference and comfort than issues of theology and spiritual formation. We have a tendency to treat the church like a vending machine, dispensing what we want when we want it, and when it doesn't we move on. This behavior demonstrates we are more formed by church as something we consume rather than church as a covenant community that we commit ourselves to.

Which is what the church is supposed to be – a community of people who covenant to follow the countercultural Way of Jesus together. If we are following the Way of Jesus, then we are not following the way of the world, and that includes how we think about church. We don't *do* church. We *be* church – together. Christians bemoan the lack of unity in the church as if unity is extrinsic to who we are. But unity is something we create together through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We need a better understanding of what it means to confess the Church is one. Jesus's prayer for unity in John 17 gives us some insight on how to think about Christian unity. In our Scripture lesson, Jesus concludes his teaching to the disciples and turns his eyes to heaven. He speaks intimately with the Father about the culmination of his mission on earth and he outlines his hopes for the beloved friends he is leaving behind. A big component of his hope is that they will be one with him and one with each other, just as he and the Father are one.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>

What does it mean to be one with each other like Jesus is one with the Father? In a word, it means love.

Jesus tells the disciples that the time has come for the Father to glorify the Son just as the Son has glorified the Father. This glory is the intimate and eternal relationship that the Father and Son share with each other – a relationship defined by mutual and reciprocal love. Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension demonstrate this love – love that sacrifices; love that overcomes; love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; love that does not end (cf. 1 Cor 13).

Jesus completes the revelation of who God is, and that revelation is love. He teaches that God's kingdom will come when we know God. Knowing God is not a cognitive action; it is not our knowledge of the Bible or our mastery of doctrine – not even memorizing the Nicene Creed. To know God is to have a loving relationship with God and (crucially) with our neighbors. God's kingdom is birthed here on earth as our love for God and neighbor grows. These two relationships go hand-in-hand: As we learn how to love God, we learn how to love our neighbor; and as we learn how to love our neighbor, we learn how to love God. Eternal life is experienced in the loving relationships that unite us to God and each other.

Nancy J. Ramsay, a professor emerita of pastoral theology, writes this about knowing God in the way that Jesus teaches: "'Knowing' describes a powerful, active, confessional, and intimately relational claim on our lives...Knowing God will be evident in our obedience to love, the singular commandment of this Gospel."²

Jesus prays to the Father that "The glory that you have given me I have given them...so *that* the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vv. 22-23). Through his ministry Jesus demonstrated for the disciples what loving relationship with other looks like – serving and being served, loving and being loved. And now Jesus prays that the disciples will be witnesses of this love through their words and actions so that more people will come to know and worship God.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide*. Edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (2010). 540.

We are unified as Christians not primarily by what we *believe*, but by how we *love*. “They will know we are Christians by our love.”³ The Church’s commitment to love is the ongoing revelation of God in the world. The purpose of our oneness is to bear witness to the love of God, so that when people look at the Church they ultimately see the One God.

The Church began as a small group of Jesus-followers with their eyes turned toward the sky, watching Jesus ascend into heaven and wondering when he would be back. Eventually those disciples took their eyes off the sky and looked around them and realized they were now the Body of Christ in the world – Jesus’s ministry was now their ministry. So, while their hearts remained fixed on the things of eternity, their eyes began to focus on the mission at hand: God’s kingdom come, God’s will be done, *on earth* as it already is in heaven.

The Nicene Creed states that the Church’s unity in love is expressed through three things: Its holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The Greek word for the Church is *ekklesia*, which literally means “those who are called out.” Christians are those who have been called out from the world into fellowship with each other and God. In that sense, there really is just one Church (with a capital ‘C’). This Church has been set apart to do the will of God.

Holy does not mean perfect; it means consecrated. Our purpose is to serve God by serving the world. The word “catholic” in the Creed highlights our global orientation. It is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. The word catholic means “universal,” from the Greek *katholikos* which means “according to the whole.” Catholic is the Creed’s way of affirming that Christians belong to a worldwide community of believers. Yes, we are members of a local congregation, but we are members first of the universal Church, connected with believers across time and space. Any Christian anywhere is part of the Church everywhere. Just like a family tree, there may be certain branches that you have a closer affinity to, but all Christians everywhere are part of the same family of God. And that family affirms a common set of beliefs outlined in the Nicene Creed, whose statements we can trace back to the original apostles. This is the meaning of “apostolic” – that what we believe has been handed down to us from those who were firsthand witnesses of Jesus and the first recipients of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-theyll-know-we-are-christians-by-our-love>

One of those first witnesses, the Apostle Paul, wrote poignantly about the unity of the Church: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6). Our mystic union as Christians in the universal Church is precisely why we confess only one baptism. We do not need to rebaptize when we move from one tradition to another because we are already members of the universal Church. In baptism, we die to our old lives of sin and are raised with Christ to new life. This is done through the power of God, whose work is always complete. To rebaptize is to question the effectiveness of God’s grace, which is why Methodists do not rebaptize.

The Nicene Creed closes by pointing to our ultimate hope: The resurrection of our bodies into the new creation. We believe that all of God’s creation will one day be redeemed and made new. The covenant relationship that we keep with each other as members of the Church, initiated at our baptisms, is a covenant that we believe will be consummated at the Second Coming with the arrival of a new heaven and earth. On that day we will no longer be divided and instead will experience complete union with God and each other.

In the meantime, we acknowledge our unity as Christians is imperfect. Often, we mistake uniformity for unity. But the Nicene Creed was not intended to create uniformity; it was intended to create unity by establishing the boundaries of our beliefs as Christians. Within this statement there is a lot of latitude for differences in belief and practice. Some churches baptize infants; others practice believer’s baptism. Some churches ordain women; others do not. Some churches practice open communion; others fence the table. The Nicene Creed does not say one way or another which position is correct. We can live with those disagreements and still share a common mission as Christians because we have been called out not by our own power but by God’s. It is God who holds us together and makes us one. Just as God’s grace is sanctifying us as individuals, so God’s grace is sanctifying the Church, transforming her in the perfect image of Christ.

As part of our sanctification, we commit ourselves to joining in covenant community with each other. We worship, we sing, we pray, we serve, we study, we witness – not alone but together. This gathered community, as imperfect as it is, is a foreshadowing of the world to come, when we will all feast together as one at God’s table, united in love. To that vision let the Church give a resounding “Amen.”