

ONE HOLY CHURCH

Hebrews 12:1-2

In 2013, **huffingtonpost.com** published a piece by an anonymous author named "Unappreciated Pastor." It was quite the buzz when it hit the world wide web. You may remember it:

Hello, my name is church, I'm sure you've heard a lot about me. I have no shortage of **critics**. Perhaps you have heard that I am boring, shallow, cheap, a waste of time.

You've **heard that I am full** of hypocrites, clowns, greedy people, the self-righteous.

Maybe you have **visited me** and discovered horrible music, passionless singing, dry preaching, rude members.

Maybe you **needed me**, and I was too busy, too "righteous," too broke, too blind.

Maybe you **joined me** and found I was distant, demanding, dull, preoccupied.

Maybe you tried to **serve in me** but were caught off guard by business meetings, committees, teams, bureaucracy.

Maybe you **left** and were surprised that nobody called, cared, noticed, invited you back.

Perhaps your experience has driven you to **speak negatively** of me, swear to never come back to me, proclaim that no one needs me, believe you're better off without me. If this is true, I have something to say to you: I'm sorry, I was wrong, I blew it, I made a huge mistake.

But remember, I **never said my name** was perfect, flawless, complete, arrived. My name is church. I welcome the hypocrite, dry, self-righteous, shallow. I welcome the sincere, passionate, forgiving, selfless. I cannot shut my doors to the people who

make you angry, uncomfortable, impatient, self-conscious. But I would remind you that we couldn't always worship in the **same room**. In the Old Testament, there was a division between Gentile, Jew, man, woman. In order for us to all worship in the same room, Christ was shamed, beaten, killed, resurrected. Which is far worse than being bored, uncomfortable, embarrassed, ignored.

So why not **come back to church** and let all of these messed up people challenge you, sharpen you, strengthen you, humble you. I can't promise you that the people will be great. This is church. It's not Heaven, Paradise, Beulah Land, The Celestial City, Come back. God wants you here. The body needs you here. The world needs your witness here. You belong here. Hello, my name is church. I miss you. I love you. I'm sorry. Can't wait to see you.¹

As we continue our journey through the Apostles' Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **Hebrews 12:1-2**. Till now in the creed, we've been declaring what we believe about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today, we consider what we believe about God's outpost on earth: his church.

And the **reviews are mixed**. No wonder. The church is a mixed bag of holiness and sinfulness, self-sacrifice and self-centeredness, the humble and the smug.

- No wonder the New Testament instructs Christians how to **repair broken relationships** because sooner or later even the best churches are bound to hurt you in some way.
- No wonder the New Testament says a lot about working for **unity** in the church.
- And no wonder Paul writes to **the Ephesian church** these important words: *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."* (Eph 4:2 NIV).

¹Unappreciated Pastor, "Hello, My Name is Church," huffingtonpost.com (Oct 20, 2013).

The church is a **laboratory** for learning Christian virtues like forgiveness, humility, forbearance, and sacrificial love. At its best the church is a haven for everyone, an outpost of gospel mission, and a shining light in the darkness that inspires saints to holiness and leads sinners home. At its worst, the church leads people away from Christ instead of to him.

This was as true in the **early centuries** when the Apostles' Creed was written as it is today. And yet here we are all these centuries later gathering as church, gathering as the body and bride of Christ proclaiming, *"I believe in one holy church and the communion of saints."* The church on earth, the church in heaven. And our Hebrews text captures all of that. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

Hebrews is more sermon than letter. Only God knows who wrote it. It has a strong Jewish flavor and is something of a Christian introduction to the Old Testament. N.T. Wright and Michael Bird suggest that *"We could summarize Hebrews this way: the scriptures had always pointed to something new and better, and it has now arrived in Jesus."*² This sermon may have been written for the church in Rome, a church composed of Jewish and Gentile Christians, a church seeing some drift because of impending persecution. Hebrews exalts the incomparable Christ and throws a lifeline to draw the church out of their drift and back to solid ground.

Like all New Testament letters, Hebrews was written for the **church on earth**. This is the only church any of us have experienced. When the creed says, *"I believe in one holy church,"* the emphasis is the church on earth—the *whole* church on earth, the *universal* church. The original words of the creed render this line *"the holy catholic church."* That's *catholic* with a lower-case c, not an upper-case C as in *Roman Catholic*, as in denomination or structure or liturgy. But lower-case c *catholic*. A **word that means** "according to the whole" or "universal"—all followers of Christ from every nation, tribe, and tongue alive on the earth right now, including you, including me.

²N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 711.

On this Sunday, local churches **gather all over the world** in houses and caves, in cathedrals and storefronts, under trees or in open meadows, to worship Christ and preach the gospel in more languages that we can count. And we gather under names like Baptist and Mennonite and Presbyterian and Amish and Methodist and Coptic and Pentecostal and Orthodox and Roman Catholic and hundreds more. But every church in every local expression worships the **same Christ**, belongs to the same family, reads from the same Bible, and, for the most part, preaches the same gospel: *“that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scripture, that he was buried, and that he rose from the dead on the third day according to the Scripture”* (1 Cor 15:3-4). This is the one holy church in which we believe. It feels pretty glorious when you think about the church universal.

It gets **a little messy** when you think about the church local. Though we believe in *“one holy church,”* this is not to say that everybody in every church has a personal relationship with Jesus. There are imposters among us, fakes, phonies, weeds growing up among the wheat. But that’s not our worry. Jesus says he will sort all that out at the end (Mt 13:24-30).

And this is not to say that every believer in every church has **his or her act together**. All of us are in the middle of our own sanctification. Some of us are pretty mature in Christ. Some of us are babies. Some feast on the 2-inch T-bone steaks of Scripture. Some require strained carrots and a baby bottle. Some are at a high point in their walk with Jesus. Some are down, some are drifting, some are one more bad experience away from giving up altogether on Christ and the church.

Yet this is the kind of church to whom Hebrews is addressed. She had her issues. Notice in **v. 1** of our text that the preacher of Hebrews calls the church to *“lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us.”* Church members allowing other things to hinder their commitment to Christ and the church. Church members wrestling with their various sins. And because of the *“sinful local church”* our belief in *“one holy universal church”* takes a right hook

to the jaw.³ Most of us **expect too much** of the local church. We like to brag on ourselves, do a little false advertising. *“Come visit us. We are the warm church, the welcoming church, the Bible-centered church, the Spirit-filled church, the inclusive church, the grace-filled church.”* It strikes me that if we churches are going to advertise honestly, we should say something like this: *“We have our finer moments, but we are largely a collection of sinners and hypocrites who can act selfish, petty, and small. And while we worship God with our lips, our hearts are often far from him. But we gather anyway because we are in desperate need of Jesus and each other.”*

Multiply churches like this **by the thousands**, and how can we call ourselves “one *holy* church” when so many of us put up hindrances to our walk with Jesus and commitment to the church and wrestle with sins that easily ensnare us? One *holy* church? Yeah, right. But we are one *holy* church. Here’s how: our holiness is not a product of our capacity to live a sinless life; it is a **product of Jesus’ work on the cross** when he took our sins on himself and gave us his righteousness. This is why in Paul’s letters to churches in Rome (1:7), Ephesus (1:1), Philippi (1:1), and even in that mess of a church in Corinth (1:2), he calls the people in those churches, *saints*.

Most of us assume a saint is a **cut above** your run-of-the-mill believer. When folks in our church like Jacob and Aleene King, Ina Combs, and Betty Crow died, many people described them as saints. Saints are on another level, we think. The apostle Paul—a saint. Francis of Assisi—a saint. Harriet Tubman—a saint. Lottie Moon—a saint. Yes. They *are* saints ... but so are you. Your sainthood is not a description of your behavior. It is a **declaration of your position in Christ**. When you put your faith in the crucified, resurrected Christ, he makes you a saint by his grace. He gives you his righteousness even when you don’t fully embrace it or live its implications. That means some of the church’s saints aren’t exactly the best role models, but thanks to Jesus’ sacrifice, love, mercy, righteousness, and forgiveness, they are saints. So in spite of the hindrances we put between us and Christ, in spite of the sins that easily ensnare us, we

³Adapted from a thought in John Killinger, *You Are What You Believe: The Apostles’ Creed for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 90.

are saints. *All* who know Christ are saints and comprise the “*one holy church*” on earth—universal and local—in which we believe.

II

But there is also a church in heaven: what the creed calls “*the communion of saints.*” Our text describes them in v. 1 as “*such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us.*” This “*communion of saints*” and “*cloud of witnesses*” could incorporate all believers in heaven *and* on earth, but our context points to heaven. Our text comes on the **heels of chapter 11** and that wonderful roll call of the faithful across the centuries. The refrain is melodic: “*By faith Abel ...; by faith Enoch ...; by faith Noah ...; by faith Abraham ...; by faith Moses ...;*” and more. The preacher of Hebrews recounts the faithful lives of past saints, named and unnamed, who followed God in the face of every challenge and persecution and kept their eyes fixed on the Lord.

This is **good news** for those of us in the church on earth. It means we don’t run our race without historical context, and we don’t run our race alone. The church on earth is connected to the church in heaven. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a communion of saints. What’s **not clear** about these witnesses is this: are they there to see us, or are they there for us to see them? Scholars disagree. Context seems to indicate that the witnesses are there for us to see. The author has just described the lives of many of them and the race they ran by faith. But it’s not so far-fetched to believe that these saints have some sense of the race we run right now. And like team members at a **track meet**, they stand around the track to encourage us to keep on running. “*I made it,*” they shout. “*Keep your eyes on Jesus, and you can make it too.*” And we are encouraged.

Abraham endured a lot and ran his race—had to move to a country he did not know, had to wait till he was 100 to get the son who would be his heir, and then God even tested him by asking for his son in sacrifice. Abraham passed the test and got his son back, but can you imagine?

Moses put up with more than anyone should have too—an arrogant Pharaoh and a rebellious, stiff-necked people—but he kept on running to the end.

Samson, a hairball of lust and violence, had as many failures as successes, yet he made it all the way home.

Rahab was a pagan prostitute and madam for a house of prostitution, but she put her faith in the one true God, and she makes this roll call of the faithful too.

Some of these saints in chapter 11 **suffered for their faith**—mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, and sawed in two—yet in dying, they live forever.

Even these saints in the Faith Hall of Fame had their sins and their entanglements with the world. But they laid them aside as best they could and ran a race that **finished in heaven**. Such a cloud of witnesses, such a communion of saints, the great church in heaven, gives us courage to lay aside our sins and run the race God has marked out for us as part of God's "*one holy church*" on earth.

When you feel like you're the **only Christian** on your team, the only Christian at your job, the only Christian in your class, the only Christian in the neighborhood, it's easy to feel alone. It's easy to feel overwhelmed. It's easy to drop out of the race and hang up your running shoes. But the communion of saints reminds us that we are not alone. Not only is Jesus with us. Not only are there other committed believers in our church family here on earth, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in heaven who ran their race and made it all the way home. It stirs hope, courage, and camaradie.

Fred Craddock went back to the community where he was born and raised in west Tennessee. While he was there, he went with an old friend to his church on Sunday evening. It was a **small church**, but he noticed that they had new leaded glass windows. Craddock was wondering how they could afford to pay for those windows. He looked at the names on the little dedication plaques in the windows, but he didn't recognize any of the names. So he asked his

friend who went to that church, *“Are these the names of new people who have moved here? I don’t recognize a single name.”*

“No,” said his friend. *“A church in St. Louis ordered these windows from Italy, and when they got them, they didn’t fit. They advertised in a church paper that they would sell them because they were going to have new ones made. They were so cheap we bought them.”*

Craddock said, *“Well, they sure are beautiful, but what are you going to do about the plaques?”*

His friend replied, *“The board discussed that, and we decided to leave those names up there. It’s good for us in our little church to realize that there are some Christian people besides us.”*⁴

Yes, it is. *“I believe in one holy church and the communion of saints.”* We take note of the church in heaven. We give thanks for them. But we don’t fix our eyes or our hope on *them*.

III

We fix our eyes and hope on Jesus. It helps to see Abraham and Moses, Gideon and Rahab, Mary, Peter, and Paul. It helps to take note of inspiring saints across the ages. It helps to glance at some of those faithful followers of Jesus you see across this sanctuary or in your Connect Group circle. It helps us live our faith with courage and endurance.

But the one who helps us most is Jesus. Look at **v. 2**: Jesus is the *“source and perfecter of our faith.”* He’s the one *“who for the joy that lay before him ... endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right and of the throne of God.”* Many who compose the church on earth and the church in heaven have had to endure a lot on this earth, but none endured more than Jesus.

⁴Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 138.

- **Humbly**, Jesus left heaven's glories for the confines of earth and human flesh.
- Always a **truth-teller**, Jesus endured the lies, ridicule, insults, and name-calling of his enemies.
- **Sinless**, Jesus faced our temptations and bore our sin in his own body on the cross.
- A **life-giver**, Jesus died on the cross for our sins.

And even though Jesus could have thrown in the towel at any point, could have called a legion of angels to rescue him from the cross and carry him to the safety of heaven, **he didn't**. He endured to *"It is finished."* He endured to *"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."* He endured to the end. And on the third day, he got up from the grave with all power in his hands. He ran his race, and he'll help you run yours because even in your sufferings, he gives you his resurrection power.

By faith we see Jesus and the saints. By faith we **keep on running**. We may jog a while. We may kick into a sprint now and then. We may slow to a walk on occasion. We may even need to rest on the side of the road for a season and tend our wounds. But with our eyes fixed on Jesus and with the saints on earth and in heaven cheering us on, we will find Holy Spirit energy and endurance to keep going to the finish line. Others have done it, and **you can too** when you keep your eyes on Jesus—Lord of earth, Lord of heaven, Lord of his church. He is with you. He is in you. He is for you. And if God is for us, if God is for his church, **who can stand against us?** The powers and principalities of this world will stand against us, but they will not prevail. The sins that easily ensnare us will mock us and stand against us, but they will not prevail. The powers of death and hell will stand against us, but they will not prevail. Jesus' church will prevail.

- There may be **division** in the church. There may be bickering and fussing and fighting. There may be more concern about personal preference than gospel mission. But the church will prevail.

- The church may be **more concerned** with buildings and budgets than the lost in need of the Savior or the poor in need of a hand. But the church will prevail.
- The **worship** may be dull, the sermons dry, and the fellowship cold. But the church will prevail.
- The church has its share of **mean and heartless people**, insensitive to others, people who, as someone said, should use glue stick in place of chap stick,⁵ people who hurt more than help. But the church will prevail.
- The church **may face** war, pandemic and persecution, but the church will prevail.

And it's **not because** of good preaching, fancy buildings, healthy budgets, exciting worship, and clear mission. It's because of Jesus. The crucified, resurrected Jesus is Lord of the church. The church is his body and his bride. And he will get his church all the way home. He's brought many home already. He'll get the rest of us home on the last day. The church will prevail because Jesus has prevailed.

Local churches will have their day and die away. Everyday some local church somewhere closes its doors for good. First Baptist, Hot Springs, has been here for 185 years this month. Who knows if it will still be here when Jesus comes back? But Jesus' *"one holy church and the communion of saints"* will *never* die. Jesus will see to it that his one holy church from every nation, tribe, and tongue will one day gather around his throne singing:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth
and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!"

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!"

⁵From a Twitter post by First Jimothy

(Rev 5:12-13)

IV

“I believe in one holy church and the communion of saints.” I do. Do you? Does your life show it? Are you committed to Jesus and his church? Are you doing your part in Jesus’ body gathered to do his mission in the world? Are you adding to the beauty of his bride? If not, make those steps today. Jesus and his church are a package deal. You can’t separate Jesus from his body. If you stepped away from the church during Covid and have never come back, we invite you back. Commit today to Christ and the church. And live such a life that while you’re a part of the church on earth and even when you become part of the church in heaven, your life will inspire others to fix their eyes on Jesus and run the race he calls them to run with endurance and joy.

In **J. F. Powers’** novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, Father Joe, shared these words about the church with an understudy:

This is a big old ship, Bill. She creaks, she rocks, she rolls, and at times she makes you want to throw up. But she gets where she’s going. Always has, always will, until the end of time. With or without you.⁶

I pray it’s with you.

Preached: October 10, 2021
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
John Scott McCallum II

⁶Cited by Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 17.

