

Unlocking Scripture: The Apostles' Creed, Pt. 12

The Holy Catholic Church
The Communion of the Saints
1 Corinthians 12: 12-13; 26-27

First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

All Saints Sunday, Nov. 3, AD 2019
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This morning, we are talking about the body of Christ, his church. The word we translate as *church* comes from the politics of Roman times. Citizens would be called out from their homes to a public assembly to discuss the important matters of the day. Such an assembly was called an *ecclesia*. A gathering of the called out. The Christians adopted that secular word as our own. We are the called out. Called out from the world to an assembly of the citizens of heaven. We come to discuss the most important matters in the universe. Then we go back out to the world to bless it with our news. The called out: that's the church. And we are a creation of the Holy Spirit who called each one of us individually into the one body of Christ.

I'd like us to look at three Biblical aspects of the church today: catholicity, contribution, and communion. So, first up is the fact the church is *catholic*. There is a clear number one on the chart of frequently asked questions about the Apostles' Creed. Why do we say we believe in the Catholic Church? Aren't we Presbyterians? Good question! Simple answer. It's catholic with a little "c" not a big "C." It's the holy catholic church, not the Roman Catholic Church! Catholic means universal. Presbyterians are part of the one universal, catholic church. Roman Catholics are part of the universal, catholic church. Eastern Orthodox are part of the catholic, universal church. No one body is the only church. But all those who form faithfully around the faith expressed in the Apostles' Creed are part of the universal, or catholic, church.

That's good news because it means the church of Jesus Christ gathers from across languages, cultures, marital status, denominations, gender, wealth percentages, educational levels, races and ethnicities. We have a fundamental identity that runs deeper than all those identity markers. We belong to Jesus and to each other. This is our first and deepest identity. The church is catholic because it unites us underneath any other identity. As Paul says, we are one body, many members. Organically united by the Holy Spirit. Every local church is an expression of the universal church. Our boundaries are the spacious fences of the

Apostles' Creed, that faithful summary of the core of Scripture's teaching. Inside the truth of the Creed, we are one united people with many distinct expressions.

The second quality of Christ's church I want to talk about is *contribution*. Making an offering for the work of the church and the care of its people goes back to New Testament times. The people of Jesus always shared what they had with each other. Once a year, for about half of a sermon, I talk to you about stewardship. This is the way we give back a portion of our income to God, the source of all our wealth, to be used for the work of his church in this place. It's important. Because we need to be givers. Our spiritual health depends on our making a return to God of a portion of what he has given us. And because our church runs on the gifts of a generous people.

Our church has significant partnerships with about 30 local ministries. It's a high value for us to reach into our city with the love of Jesus. Now I'm either on the board or an adviser to the boards of several of those ministries. Fund raising is always on their mind. We all get invited to be on the banquet circuit. And I'm happy to do it. We celebrate the work of a ministry at a festive event and we make a contribution to their continuing work. Some of these groups hire professional development directors as part of their fund raising efforts. And sometimes this has made me a little anxious. I have wondered, "Wow, is the church behind? Should we be making more effort to raise money? Should we be hustling our people more? Are we going to lose our share of people's giving?"

But then I try to calm down. I remember that hustle is not how our people work. We limit ourselves to one brief stewardship season. We communicate that our commitments to the church place each of us in all that our church does. And then, beautifully, we see our members respond. That's where the theme came from on the colorful brochure you got in the mail. "*Of course we do.*" That's the phrase that came to me. Do our people support the work of Jesus through our church? *Of course we do.* I don't mean that phrase to be complacent. I certainly never take your gifts for granted. But I respect you enough, and trust you enough, not to push you. Do we love our church enough to give to God through it? *Of course we do.* It's who we are.

I want you to know that this understated, understood commitment is deeply personal to Rhonda and me. Many years ago, someone challenged us to be tithers. To give ten percent of our income back to God. And he challenged us by his example to mark off that ten per cent on "gross income." That is, ten per cent before taxes. It took a while to get there, but eventually we did. And it's a

liberating, joyful, trusting place to be. I'm not saying you have to do that to be spiritual. But what I passionately want you to know is that Rhonda and I are deeply invested in the same church I ask you to invest in. About three quarters of our tithe goes to this church. The other fourth goes to various ministries we feel passionate about. For us, that's a good proportion, 3 to 1 to our church. The community where we worship Christ and live life together with you. The community that shapes us and energizes us and walks with us through life. And we're not alone in this commitment. You can know that our pastoral staff watches our church budget with the eyes of those who are personally, passionately, financially invested.

Last week, we got Rick and Jamie Naqvi's stewardship letter in the mail. I read it aloud to Rhonda while she was chopping some vegetables for dinner. When I finished she said, "That's so wonderful. That's the most beautiful description of why we give to our church." I want to reread some excerpts for you:

We love to sit in our beautiful sanctuary and imagine all of the families and individuals who have entered through those wooden double doors. What were their stories? Who sat where we are sitting decades ago? It is delightful to think of the hands once young, aging through the years touching the same pew week after week as they stood in worship among brothers and sisters in Christ. What prayers were whispered in quiet moments? We imagine the walls have the words of hymns invisibly etched by the sound waves of the voices through all of these years. Through the eyes of imagination, we see all the children who have laughed and played on the lawn, all the brides who breathed deep as they stepped across the threshold of the aisle...yes these are a few of the things our family imagines.

We know when we arrive here at First Presbyterian we are entering a story that is full of a cast of characters drawn together by our creator God over the multitude of years. In many ways we are the fruit of their giving. Their obedience has blessed us with a place to call our church home...What we give provides the resources to continue the story. This is the work we do together - *the story we are becoming*.

We challenge you this fall to think of your tithe not as mere money but as a writing tool for the history of this church. What we give matters to the life of this congregation and to the lives of everyone who enter through those warm wooden doors. We encourage you to imagine how you can join Christ in the telling of his story through First Presbyterian Church.

Isn't that beautifully said? I'll be thinking of those words when we dedicate our Estimate of Giving next Sunday. And I've been telling folks, "Fill out your Estimate *before* kickoff of the Alabama game! That way, in delirious excitement or deflating loss, you will have decided first what matters most."

The final aspect of the holy catholic church to consider today is *communion*. Around the world, this is traditionally All Saints Sunday. Now saint just means someone who is in Christ, who shares his holiness. Saint means believer. Anyone who belongs to Christ is a saint. So, on All Saints Sunday, we read out the names of our members who have died since last All Saints Sunday. They are not lost. We celebrate their eternal life in Christ. As we partake of communion, we celebrate the great Christian hope for those who have died in Christ. They are with Jesus now. And we are connected to them through Christ's Spirit. When Jesus returns, all believers, those living and dead, will be united in one vast, resurrection communion. We are one body with many members. We do not perish with earthly death. We do not rise to be absorbed into some great, impersonal oneness, nor to go to some personal, private paradise. We rise to be in joyful communion with all those past, present and future who belong to Jesus. We are mystically connected across all time and space.

This past summer, while visiting my brother, we had dinner with one of his friends who is a pastor in the Dutch Church. We were talking about the Lord's Supper, and he said that sometimes as they give the bread, they say, "The body of Christ. Be who you are." I had never heard that before. At first it sounded kind of new-agey to me. As if the bread of Christ is a kind of energy bar to power you for the life you want to live. Worn out? Have a hunk of Jesus and get on with the life you choose! I asked my brother if he'd ever heard of that before. Smart dude that he is, he told me it wasn't new age. It was old, from Augustine 1500 years ago. I looked it up. Big brother was right! But the context is important.

Augustine was teaching a group of young people about communion. He raised a question he knew they were thinking. When you receive the bread, the pastor says, "The body of Christ." How can this be? One, because it's bread. Two, because the body of Jesus ascended to heaven. So how can you be giving me Jesus' body? Well, explained Augustine, first, of course it's bread. But bread is a simple sign of something mystical. By his Spirit, Jesus gives you himself in this sacrament. Two, yes, the body of Jesus is in heaven. But the body

of Jesus is also his church. His people. Jesus is the head of his body, all his people sent into the world to be his witnesses.

So, get this. *Be what you can see*. When you see with physical eyes the literal bread, believe what you see with spiritual eyes: the body of Christ. Jesus gives you his body, broken for you. This is the body of Christ coming down from heaven to nourish you. But also, *be what you can see*: the body of Christ is all around you. It is the church. That's what Paul means when he says you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Take in Jesus and go live as a loving, caring member of his body. And remember, he sends his whole body out into the world so the world can partake of you and thus taste Jesus. Go give yourselves away until next week when you come back to get nourished again. Believe what you see, the body of Christ given to you. *Be who you are*: the body of Christ sent to the world.

So, Augustine says, when you take the bread, say Amen. Your Amen is like your personal signature, affirming your faith. Say Amen to what you are: the body of Christ. Say Amen to what Jesus gives you: the body of Christ. Say Amen to your mission: the body of Christ, his church, given to love one another. The body of Christ given to nourish the world with grace and love.¹

In that sense, every time we have communion together, we are urged to our deepest identity. Receive who you most truly are: members of the body of Christ. Be who you are: Christ's body given for the world.

I believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints. It's our identity and our mission, our call home and our sending outward. Beloved, believe what you see: the body of Christ is given for you. Be who you are: the body of Christ given for the world. Can I get a signature? Can I get an Amen?

¹ See Augustine, Sermon 272: On the Eucharist as Christ's Body, https://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm; also,