

ARE WE “CATHOLIC”?

Texts: Exodus 19:3-6; I Cor. 12:12-13, 27-31

3/14/10

I

There’s an experience I have in our community all the time that you should know about. Eventually somebody will get around to asking me what I do for a living and I will tell them that I am a minister. Usually they’ll say something like “Oh, that’s wonderful and where is your church?” And I’ll say, “I pastor Westminster Presbyterian Church on Main Street in Snellville.” And they’ll say, “Oh I know where that is. Isn’t it that large gray stone church located across from city hall?” “No, that’s not it.” Oh it must be that church with that huge white steeple up the street a bit.” “No that’s not it.”

“You don’t say. So where is your church?” “We’re located next to South High School as you head toward Loganville.” Silence. “Really? I never knew that was a church!”

There are a number of people in our community that for whatever reason don’t think we look like a church. So how do you recognize a church?

The Apostles’ Creed offers us some help, but it is not the bricks and mortar kind. It proclaims that our church, any church, is the creation of the Holy Spirit; not an architect.

A Spirit-built church does have certain “dead give-away” characteristics – ones we should learn to look for. We could easily come up with a list of four or five. The creed mentions only two: Spirit built churches are *holy*; Spirit build churches are *catholic*.

II

But let's back up for a minute. If a "church" isn't a building, what is it? Before we get to "holy" or "catholic" isn't there something that needs to be said first?

In the bible the "church" is always people; it is never a building.

We get the word church from a Hebrew and Greek word that means a called assembly of people. You get the spirit of that from our Old Testament lesson. God speaks to people in Israel after their escape from Egyptian slavery:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you safely to myself. (19:4)

God calls a church through the power of the Spirit. A church is not a gathering of sincere people in search of self-fulfillment. A church is not a gathering of do-gooders in search of something good to do. A church is people God calls – interrupts, saves, rescues - for God's purposes.

That matters, because given the affluent part of the world in which we live we tend to identify our buildings with our churches. Right now we are "having church". But when you leave in a little while the "church" won't be here anymore. It goes with you.

The building will be here; and a good building can do a world of good. But it is not a church. Church happens where the people of God are. And that makes the church as portable as you are willing to become.

And churches made of people have a different purpose than churches that are confused with buildings. God speaking again in Exodus says to the people:

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (19:5-6)

The assembly is called out of the world to live out God's purposes for the world. That's another identifier of a Spirit built church the creed doesn't mention. It is *apostolic* – sent out to say and do the good news of Jesus for the benefit of those who do not know him.

When it comes to knowing what the church is the children are usually a step ahead of the adults:

I am the church
You are the church
We are the church together
All God's people
All around the world
We are the church together.

III

Of course sitting in a room with a bunch of people doesn't make you a church. The creed says there has to be something distinctive about these people. They are to be "holy".

We'll now we're in trouble, aren't we? If there's one truth about Christians we can confirm by experience we aren't sinless. It takes no imagination to come up some recent public exposure of a Christian leader –an extramarital affair, the mishandling of money, addiction to drugs or pornography – that convinces us that the church is anything but holy.

Do we really know what it means to be "holy"? At it's root it means to be "set apart from the ordinary, different, consecrated for a special purpose." Holiness first describes what God is, not what we are. What God says and what God does is holy.

A Holy God, in the power of a Holy Spirit, sets about to create a holy church. And then a bit of miracle happens. The church is holy first of all because God sees us through the holiness of Jesus Christ. We through faith gain his holy standing before God. We are holy.

And we must become holy. That's the work of the Spirit among us – to make us what we are! When we become part of the church we are issued a size 46 extra-long holy suit to put on over our size 38 regular spiritual condition.

We say, "this is crazy. The suit doesn't fit. I look goofy. I can't begin to fill out these clothes you've asked me to wear." And God looks at his church and says, "You do look pretty goofy. But in time you'll fill out. You'll grow into what you are."

A holy church is a church that is always growing into what it was set apart to be. It is a gracious people, because we know none of us fit the suit. It is an earnest people, because we know that God is dead serious that one day – a day beyond our control – we will.

Holy churches are visible because they are different. No matter how good the people at the Lion's Club, booster club, country club, or PTA may be; none of those assemblies are set apart for the purposes of God. But we have no other reason to exist.

IV

And then the creed says we are “catholic”. So let's ask the obvious question. In joining the Presbyterian Church did you secretly pledge submission to the bishop of Rome, or is something else going on here?

Protestants, non-Roman Catholics, start getting all jumpy at this point. You look at some versions of the Apostles' Creed and it says “the holy Christian church” (which is totally wrong) or “the holy universal church” (which is weak but better). But “catholic” is a perfectly good word and it isn't reserved for one branch of the Christian church. It means “I believe in the holy “at all places, in all times” church.

When we say we are “catholic” we say we share in common with all believers living and dead a story that is true for the whole world. It is God loving, saving, and reclaiming everything through Jesus Christ.

To be a church is to live in the past and present – at the same time. It just doesn't work when Christians do church as if two thousand years of church history doesn't matter. We need the witness of those who have died in Christ. We love our own times too much – we criticize them too little. The new thing and the next thing is not always the best thing.

And it just doesn't work when Christians do church as if everything that isn't old is suspect. Our faith isn't just historic, it is missionary. Changing times call for changing approaches to people. There was a time when the printing press was seen as an enemy of the faith, and the pipe organ was seen as too grandiose and ostentatious for Christian worship.

Catholic churches live across times. And catholic churches have a circle of concern that reaches across geography and culture.

As Paul writes in First Corinthians, chapter 12:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts...So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. (12-13)

Do you see it? The Holy Spirit crosses boundaries. And it creates “catholic” churches that do the same.

The Spirit’s working in a congregation when we realize the church isn’t mainly the people paid to use their talents. A catholic church recognizes the call of God on each other’s lives, summons each others gifts, and sets each other free to do ministry.

It’s the Spirit’s work when churches recognize God not only at work in their congregations but in congregations of believers around them. So we look to make common cause with neighboring Christians regardless of denominational brand – and even if they have no brand at all. We should be praying for the Christians down the street even as we pray for the ones in this building or across this globe.

It’s the Spirit’s work when churches recognize their brothers and sisters across cultures and across this globe. Christians are dying today because of their faith, and for their faith, in Africa, Asia, and Middle East in greater numbers than any time in history. But we tend not act when we see it as a Nigerian, Chinese, Palistinian, Indian, or Asian issue instead of a Christian one.

Your children and my children are growing up in a world more international, more diverse, more multi-cultural than any their grandparent could have dreamed up. And many in that world are telling them the Christian faith is part of the problem and not part of the answer.

But the Bible says that the church of Jesus Christ is big enough, catholic enough, to make sense of that complex world. If we want them to remain people of faith, we’d best pray that our small bit of the church will become as catholic as the creed confesses and the Spirit allows.

IV

Are we “catholic”? We’d better hope so. The Spirit wants to make good catholics of us all. People growing deep in their holiness and wide in their concern.

Is that the kind of church we want to become?