

**SECOND READING:** Matt 9:35-38

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD.**

**FIRST READING:** 1 Peter 2:4-10

<sup>4</sup> As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— <sup>5</sup> you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house<sup>a</sup> to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." <sup>7</sup> Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," <sup>8</sup> and, "A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the Message—which is also what they were destined for. <sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

This is the word of the Lord. **THANKS BE TO GOD**

**\*“I Believe...in the holy catholic church”**

The next phrase which you might expect us to study in our sermon series on the Apostle’s Creed would be the one regarding the Holy Spirit, having now studied God the Creator and Jesus the Son. But we spent time on the Spirit on Pentecost so I thought we might today consider the phrase that tends to cause so much confusion, “*I Believe in the holy catholic church*”. And THAT means that first, we need to clarify the words, “holy” and “catholic”.

\*“Holy”...When we say we believe in the holy church, we’re not saying that the church is filled with righteous, saintly people, far, far from it. No, in fact, the church is often referred to as a hospital for sinners not a hotel for saints. We, you and I, understand this, but for many people, it is confusing. What they see when they look at the Church are people with great character flaws, ones who are self-righteous and judgmental or who blatantly practice injustice and violence over others. They see people who claim the Faith but only nominally so, or who instead claim it with a shallow and immature fanaticism. \*This seeming hypocrisy may be one of the reasons that surveys show that since 2007, the percentage of adults who identify as “Christian” has steadily fallen from 78% to now 63%.<sup>1</sup>

The confusion could only be compounded with the word “holy” \*if the word is not explained to mean “belonging to God and set apart for God’s purposes”. I Peter says it well, “*Once you weren’t a people, but NOW you are God’s people!*” (1 Pt 2:10). In Greek, the word is *hagios* which was used to describe the utensils set apart for only for the purpose of Temple worship (i.e. the special candles, the incense, the bowls).<sup>2</sup> We are to be used for God’s special purposes. We’re set apart to be servants, to be humble, sacrificial, and generous examples for others. We’re to be ambassadors of God’s welcome, hope and inner peace to all we meet. Just as William Temple once said, “*The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the purpose of benefitting its non-members.*”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>. (accessed 7-7-23)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Barnes. “*I Believe in the Church*”. <https://1stpres.com/wp-content/uploads/I-Believe-in-the-Church-Eph.-2-1.12.20-1.pdf>. (accessed 7-7-2023).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Barnes.

\*Many metaphors are used in scripture for the holy church...Christ's family, the body of Christ, Jesus' flock, God's beloved community (koinonia) or the temple of the Holy Spirit. One of my favorites is bride, specifically, Christ's bride, loving Christ above all others, seeking to be faithful to him. Holy.

\*Now, "catholic"...this word is an adjective, thus a lower case "c". It is not referring to a title as in Roman Catholic Church. This is sometimes misunderstood. The word means "universal, everywhere", and it is meant to remind believers that despite differences in language or ethnicity, or anything else which might divide us, we, God's holy people, are *united by the Spirit and intended to be one, one ekklesia*. Unfortunately, despite Jesus' great emphasis and obvious desire otherwise, there are many, many divisions within the Church. For instance, on Wikipedia, I counted 48 different denominations alone with "Presbyterian" in their name in the United States,<sup>4</sup> and 45,000 different denominations globally.<sup>5</sup>

So, as Adam Hamilton says, "*our belief in the holy, catholic church is an ecumenical belief, that all who call upon the name of Christ and seek to follow him as Savior and Lord know themselves to be, despite their denominational or nondenominational names, part of the one universal church.*"<sup>6</sup> Yes, whether we worship as Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Pentecostals, whatever...and whether we plant ourselves in great cathedrals with the magnificent pipe organs, or whether we gather in a shack in the Appalachians, singing to the accompaniment of a fiddle, or whether we assemble in a bunker in Ukraine or covertly in a home in Northern India, or whether we dance to the beat of a drum in Central Africa, we are all part of God's universal catholic church.

\*Ok. Ok, so, with this understanding of the words, "holy" and "catholic", what does it mean then that we profess, "*I believe in the holy catholic church*"? (repeat) \*Well, it means, friends, that we know that we are God's people set apart to do Christ's work ...holy...and we are to do it in places near and far, in the world, TOGETHER...catholic!

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Presbyterian\\_and\\_Reformed\\_denominations\\_in\\_North\\_America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Presbyterian_and_Reformed_denominations_in_North_America)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ocregister.com/2023/04/07/you-might-be-surprised-at-how-many-christian-denominations-there-are-in-the-world/>

<sup>6</sup> Adam Hamilton. *Creed*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2016),108-128.

\*Doing things together is not always easy. Despite the mountains of data that prove we, humans, are wired to be together, needing others who can nurture us and whom we can nurture, we are fallen creatures who are prone to disappoint and hurt each other, even in the church. We cause one another to WANT to go it alone, to be Christian Lone Rangers. This certainly contributes to why there are so many people who claim they are “spiritual but not religious” and why THAT figure for church membership is, as we noted, declining in the US and other countries. But, friends, we need not give up on the Church, but remember that the Church is meant to be committed to redemption, transformation and love. We can’t give up on her just like we shouldn’t divorce our spouse or leave our kids when they hurt our feelings. We cannot, as Paul says, separate ourselves from the body of Christ and expect to survive anymore that we can expect our hands and feet to survive apart from our physical bodies (1 Cor 12).

*One of my favorite illustrations is that of a pastor who visited the home of a man who had been absent from church life for a number of weeks. When invited in, the pastor sat down opposite the fireplace with its warm glowing fire. After a time, the pastor took the fireplace tongs, reached into the fire and took a glowing coal and placed it outside onto the hearth. Not speaking, the two men watched as the coal lost its glow, as the heat soon disappeared from it, and as it turned gray. Then the pastor placed it back into the fire. Soon the coal was glowing red once again, and heat was rising from it. The man said, “Pastor, I get the point. I’ll be back with everyone next Sunday”.<sup>7</sup>*

\*Right. The phrase, “*I believe in the holy catholic church*” means we are to be doing Christ’s work together, but it also means we are to be doing the work in places near and far, in the world Christ came to save. Brothers and sisters, FPC-CC is such a beautiful example of Christ’s body, taking care of each other within the Church in deep and meaningful ways. I see it so often when a member is sick or grieving or in crisis of some kind, and other members meet with them to pray, to make them smile or be encouraged, to provide them food or transportation, to care for their children, do their shopping, wash, whatever is needed to ease the stress. Often,

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<sup>7</sup> Anon.

when I pay a pastoral visit, I see their walls or doors or tables covered with cards that have been sent to cheer them. I am so often moved by you, FP.

I do have a challenge for you though too, a challenge that cannot be met by some of you...you have too much on your plates and need focus on keeping your courage to survive the difficult times you are in. But for some other of you, possibly this challenge is on target:

\*What if, in addition to being known for how well we care for one another here in our church family, we were known in the community by how well we cared for those out there? What if we were known not only as a small and dynamic congregation but also one that has large compassionate hearts, which push back the darkness of poverty, suffering and injustice in the communities of Copperas Cove and Killeen? What if, in addition to counting attendance figures, we counted hours that our members volunteered in ecumenical community programs, ones that testify to the truth and power of the gospel, of God's mercy and love for all? What if, in addition to being known as a church who welcomes and invites any and everyone who comes to our doors, we were also known as the church who meets others where they are? There is so much life experience, and spiritual maturity, in our church family, think of what that could mean to the homeless, the lost, those returning from deployment or trying to get a start as an immigrant in a new and frightening place. They need not necessarily be invited into this space, per se, but simply to a place of common safety and equity under the cross. This challenge I think might just serve to get us, as a whole congregation, more focused, in being not only Christ's holy church here, but Christ's holy catholic church out there, in the world.

\*Beloved friends, the writer of I Peter said, "*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.*" And Jesus said, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" \*As we now stand to say the Apostles' Creed, let's say it with conviction for the work that we are called to do together in the

world we do as Christ's beloved community, as his flock, his family, his Temple, his bride, his body....as the holy, catholic church. Amen.