March 26, 2017

Mark 2:1-5

I Believe in the Church and the Communion of Saints

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Mark 2:1-5 The Message

After a few days, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and word got around that he was back home. A crowd gathered, jamming the entrance so no one could get in or out. He was teaching the Word. They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren’t able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, “Son, I forgive your sins.”

 We have been making our way through the Apostle’s Creed this Lent. We have talked about our belief in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. We talked about Jesus who gets an entire paragraph devoted to him in the Apostle’s Creed. Last week Roy talked about the six words in the Apostle’s Creed that tell us about our belief in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe it, and that’s all I am going to say about that. The litany of I believe statements continues, I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.

We say the church is holy, but it doesn’t look very holy. I almost feel like I should blush when I say holy because the Christian church I hear about in the news is not very holy. Sometimes I wonder why anybody ever comes to a church, because it is so human. The church is filled with hypocrites and judgmental people. Folks who aren’t involved in church will often say that they like Jesus, but they don’t want anything to do with Jesus’ people in the church.

Faith is something we do together, church presses us up against people with whom we normally might have no contact at all, only to discover that we are brothers and sisters in God’s quirky family.[[1]](#footnote-2) I am saved to be saved with you, us together.

So, when we say we believe in the holy church, we aren’t saying that the church is filled with perfect people. We are not perfect. We are saying the church belongs to God, and not to us. It means that when new folks come, they are here because of God. They are not here because of us. Believing in the holy church means that our focus should be on what God wants God’s church to do for God.

 We said the church is catholic, what does that mean? Now we get to the part in our Apostle’s Creed that has an asterisk. Whenever we say it together as a church community, I always want to point out, make sure to look at the asterisk! The asterisk explains that catholic means universal. We say catholic and we immediately think about how we are different from Roman Catholics, but the word catholic is supposed to be a reminder of the church’s unity. It is supposed to be a reminder that every community of believers around the world is bound together in the gospel. We are all a part of one church, no matter where we live, what language we speak or the color our skin.

 But the church doesn’t feel very united. In fact, when the Western and Easter church split in 1054, the Western church kept the name Catholic which meant universal, or real. The Eastern church took the name Orthodox, which meant right, because they felt they were the church with the right beliefs and the right practices. So, the Western church could say they were the real church, and the Eastern church could say they were the right church. Since the beginning of time, we have found ways to divide ourselves. We make jokes about beating the Baptists to Luby’s for lunch. Sometimes I wonder if God weeps at our sibling rivalry with Southern Baptists and Presbyterians and Lutherans and Methodists and Roman Catholics.

 When I was the pastor in Krum, there were five churches in town. The Methodists, the Baptists, the Assemblies of God, and two Church of Christ. I wanted to know why there were two, what had happened, who had gotten mad at who? What was the fight about? I asked everybody, because I wanted to know! But, the fight was so old, people would say, oh, somebody got mad about something.

There is this mindless division in the Church for which Christ gave his life[[2]](#footnote-3). But then I wonder if God has plans for how to use our fractured churches. We obviously don’t have our act together as Christians, so God is going to exploit our inability and turn our shattered unity into a collection of broken windows through which different kinds of broken people will still manage to climb into the kingdom of God.[[3]](#footnote-4)

 Jesus prays that his followers would be one, as Jesus and God the Father are one. In John 17 Jesus prays, “The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind— just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us.” Jesus wants you and me to be unified and together as Jesus and God the Father are. Jesus wants us not to judge one another, but to love one another and forgive one another. It is like when you walk into a family gathering and you remind your children to be good, and then they act like the children that they are. We in the church judge one another and we dislike each other and we hold grudges. But, we still believe that all who call upon the name of Christ and seek to follow Jesus are part of one universal church. And that means everybody.

We Methodists try to engage social issues. The Baptists know the centrality of the Bible. The Quakers embrace the need for silence. The Catholics embody the rich tradition of the faith and the need for saints. The nondenominational denominations creatively reach people wary of churchiness. Mennonites are humble, Presbyterians use their brains, and the AME Zions can outsing us all. We who are fixed in our pews need a little liberation from the Pentecostals so we too can show a little emotion and move if only a little bit. The evangelicals want to save souls, and the more “liberal” groups want to administer medicine and food. Surely all are needed. Independent congregations can teach us all to take initiative, and connectional churches (that is us) with bishops can expand our vision and realize we are part of something bigger. We have in common the only thing that really matters: Jesus the Christ. Faith can see beyond our divisions because we are one Church to God, and we shouldn’t be going after other churches but after hate, violence, greed, and selfishness.[[4]](#footnote-5)

 The church is a community of people who belong to Christ and who are called to do the work of Jesus in the world. We are God’s people (1 Peter 2:10). I remember when I was an intern pastor and I invited a family who wanted to join the church to come forward. I kept talking about the name of the church and how they were now a part of the church and a longtime church member came up afterwards, gave them hugs and said, “Welcome to this family.” The church is Jesus’ family; it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It takes a lot of courage to be a part of a church family. Many of us have been hurt by church in the past. We have been hurt by people in the church.

 I have decided to continue to be a part of a church because of the accountability that I find here. I need other people to help me grow in love, I need other people to help me serve, I need other people to challenge me to care for others, and I need other people to pray with and for me. You are my sisters and brothers in Christ, and we care for one another, work for the good of one another, and support one another. Paul told the new church in Galatia, “Carry each other’s burdens and so you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). We are bound together by a common faith and work together to live out that faith in the world. We are called to watch over one another in love, to pray together and to serve together.

 I love our scripture for today because it is the story of friends who will do everything in their power to help their friend. They couldn’t get into the house where Jesus was teaching because of the crowds, so they carry their friend up to the roof, take the roof off of the house, and lower him down in front of Jesus. Jesus is so moved by their faith and loyalty that he heals the man. Jesus says it was the faith and determination of his friends that healed the man.[[5]](#footnote-6)

 From Mark 2:1-5, After a few days, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and word got around that he was back home. A crowd gathered, jamming the entrance so no one could get in or out. He was teaching the Word. They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren’t able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, “Son, I forgive your sins.”

 That is what the church is meant to look like. The church is God’s answer to our need for belonging, acceptance, community, support and love. You are never alone; this is your family. It is our responsibility to see who is alone, see who may need a friend, see who needs encouragement, and then be the church for them.[[6]](#footnote-7) We provide support and care for one another. When the church is being the church, we are living for others, encouraging and blessing others, and we are ourselves, welcomed and loved for who we are. We are Christ’s community and it is by our works of mercy, compassion and justice that others are drawn closer to Christ.

 Today my friend Gregg Smith was supposed to be our preacher. We were going to participate in the Year of Unity that you may have heard about. We were going to have a pulpit exchange, and my friend Gregg, who is African-American, was going to be our preacher. Gregg is the Associate Pastor at Oak Lawn UMC and is the Director of the Oak Lawn Community Outreach Center. The first time that Gregg entered Oak Lawn UMC was when he was homeless and taking drugs. He wanted to use a phone. He came into the church doors and met June Worsham. June was in her 80s at the time and she talked to Gregg like he was a human being. She loved him, she asked him about his family and where he grew up. She wanted to get to know him better. June showed Gregg that he was loved by God, and loved by her. June is the reason that Gregg came to Oak Lawn the next Sunday. June is the reason that Gregg gave his life to Christ, and is now a pastor at the church. June passed away last week and Gregg is giving June’s eulogy at 1 pm today. He is very sorry he couldn’t be with us today, but he will definitely come soon! When God sees pain and brokenness, injustice and need in the world, God sends the church.[[7]](#footnote-8) I believe in the holy catholic church is a prayer, a longing, a reminder that we all get it wrong and at times we get it right, and we anticipate life with God in heaven, where there will be no sections for different churches.[[8]](#footnote-9)

 I think about Sarah who came to church with Andrea. Andrea’s dad, Chris, used to sit with Andrea while her mom sang in the choir and then when Chris passed away, his best friend John would sit next to Andrea. Then when John tragically passed away, Sarah sat next to Andrea. It reminds me of The Lord of the Rings when the hobbit Merrie says to Frodo, “You can trust us to stick with you through thick and thin, to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone and go off without a word, because we are your friends.” In this church you can’t trust us to let you face your trouble alone.[[9]](#footnote-10)

 I believe in the communion of saints. A saint is someone sacred, someone holy. It is someone who has given their life to God and who does the work of Jesus. We are all called to be saints for others, to love others as we love ourselves. Proverbs 31:8 encourages us to “speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves.” We are called to show kindness and compassion for those who are hurting. We are also united with those who are saints in heaven. We are united with Chris Mims, and John Parrish, and I am united with my grandmother, Lois, and my grandfather, Guy, who taught me about mercy and justice and love.

 We belong to God and we are set apart for God’s work. In God’s eyes there is only one church, though it is made up of many different groups. We are bound together, saints here on earth and saints in heaven. We belong to one another, we are family. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This paragraph taken from Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. P. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Howell, James. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. P. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)