

"I believe in the holy catholic church"

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne August 5, 2007

Reading from the Gospel of Luke (13:24, 29-30 NLT)

Jesus told them, "The door to heaven is narrow ... and yet people will come from all over the world to take their places in the Kingdom of God. [And note this:] some who are despised now will be greatly honored then; and some who are greatly honored now will be despised ..."

Reading from the prophet Joel (2:28-29,32)

"I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: your sons will prophesy, also your daughters. Your old men will dream, your young men will see visions. I'll even pour out my Spirit on the servants, men and women both ... Whoever calls, 'Help, God!' gets help."

Reflection

Twice in the Bible we are given this promise. Just in case you might have missed it the first time in the words of the prophet Joel, they get repeated in the New Testament. God promises to "pour out his Spirit" upon all people. All people. Not just some, not just the people we like, not just those who belong to one church or another. All kinds of people. But just as we showed you last week ... it's one thing for God to send something your way. It's another thing entirely whether or not you receive what God offers you. Will you receive the Spirit God offers to pour out upon you today? As a more traditional translation of this passage says, "**Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.**" God offers freely, yet you can just as freely turn away from his Spirit. Or you can accept it, if you trust in God to be your leader and forgiver, because that's what we mean when we say, "**Lord and Savior.**" Christians have believed for centuries that the Spirit of God will lead them to know the truth, both about God and about themselves. It's in knowing Jesus that I find my sense of purpose and my hope for the future, it's in Jesus I find balance in my life and guidance for my decisions, in fact, it's when I am most open to Jesus as my leader that I find where I am and who I am. If you're ready to open up to the Spirit Jesus has offered you, please stand and join me now ...

Intro to the message: Each time we say the Creed, we profess a belief in the "holy catholic church." That statement causes a lot of concern for those who think we're saying something about the Roman Catholic church down the street. Remember though, the creed predates any ideas of Roman Catholic churches by about 900 years. The word catholic means universal. When you say you believe in a catholic church you lay claim to being part of something big and beautiful, to be a small part of an ever growing, ever widening

community of the faithful. You are not part of a sect, of a denomination, or anything else smaller than being part of Christ himself. And many will come, Jesus told us, from far and wide to join this family of the faithful. For Jesus asked us to become one church, united in prayer, united in purpose, with a mission to baptize the rest of the nations and show them how to follow his lead. The catholic church was supposed to be united by the one Spirit and knit together like a body. We don't do that very well. But at least that was the plan:

Reading from 1 Corinthians (12:13-27 NLT)

Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit. Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am only an ear and not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it ... The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you" ... So God has put the body together in such a way that makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it.

Image of our God

*We are the image of our God, a beautiful array
People from all around the world, each color he has made
We are the image of our God, the reason that he came
Giving his life to save us all and now we bear his name
No one he loves greater, no one he loves less
In his loving kindness everyone is blessed
He doesn't see the outside, he loves just who we are
He looks beyond the surface to see within the heart*

Back to the message: I remember her as a young woman with a number of questions but a clear faith in Jesus as her personal savior. She said she was confused after attending our services. I get that a lot ... She asked to chat with me privately. We stepped into the front room, which is now a classroom but was then a bit more like an office, with books and pictures. She liked the music and the messages except she didn't know why we said we were catholic. She was proud not to be like them. I explained the word catholic in the creed meant universal, but half-way through my expert explanation her face became blank. When I paused for a breath she pointed to the bookshelf. Right there, under the replica of an old religious icon of Jesus (not a very protestant kind of picture) there was a small wooden rosary. It had been given to me by a priest I met when I visited Christ's tomb in Jerusalem. The mere presence of the thing stopped the conversation and the woman fled the office never to be seen again here at your friendly neighborhood church.

Some ideas of what it means to be catholic I guess can be scary. They don't need to be. I am proud to be a catholic. My biggest achievement in life is to be a priest in the catholic church. Now you understand, I'm not Roman Catholic, to be sure, because I have a wife and kids, things the Roman church frowns upon for their priests. And the Roman Catholic Church would not consider me to be catholic either. As recently as a few weeks back the Pope emphasized once again that the true church is one, and by the way, it's his. The rest of us Christians may be nice people, a few of us may attain heaven's rewards, but we do not belong to the catholic

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faith. Indeed, the farther you get from Rome, the further you wander into mistaken beliefs and moral uncertainty. But as we used to say up North where I grew up, there's no accounting for taste. Long before the word catholic was identified with the Roman Catholic church, it had another definition, a very technical one. This comes from the year 434 from a fellow later known as St. Vincent. He stated: "**[Catholics] hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.**" He went on to explain that the catholic faith (remember, still 600 years before there was any break between the Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and 1100 years before the Protestant Reformation) ... the catholic faith follows three rules: universality, antiquity, and consent (that's the idea of everywhere, always and by all). What is catholic is something the whole church confesses around the world, that does not depart from the faith of the church in the past, and agrees with the teachings of "almost all" the priests and religious authorities. Please note a couple important things here. The catholic faith is a good thing because it:

(1) fulfills our real desire to know what is true, so we can truly know God and following him faithfully, and

(2) keeps us from the personal opinions, whims, fads, or odd interpretations of our faith that creep in and distract believers from knowing God fully.

Basically for me being a catholic comes down to this. No one died and left me in charge, especially not Jesus on the cross. I don't get to make stuff up about what the church teaches or believes to be true. You should be very happy about that folks. After all, there's no "Gospel of Roger." I try to help you see how to apply the church's teachings in your life. And yes I do change things, but not about what we teach, only how we teach it. That's the neat thing about Church of the Spirit, it uses modern practices to talk to modern people about their everyday challenges. And yet we constantly point you back to the catholic faith that's been around for the better part of 2000 years.

That's not the case everywhere. And it may not be what you are looking for from a church. OK. But it's all I've got. The catholic faith for me is the sure foundation of what we know about Jesus. I'm not about to try to build my life on anything else. I've tried it before and had problems. I've met a lot of other people who have tried to build their lives on other foundations. One person wants to find security and grabs for anything that makes him feel safe. Another person feels they need to be in charge, in control, and that belief changes his behaviors and spoils his relationships with others. Someone else wants to enjoy themselves or be rich or famous, or achieve something special. But at what price? What price will you pay for doing things your own way? I've chosen instead to do things God's way, at least the best I can. May I suggest if you're looking for some stability in life, if you want to find balance in your life and your relationships, there's help. If you are looking for a strong foundation, there's one that has lasted the centuries. It's the catholic faith.

In honesty I need to offer full disclosure. This view of what makes a church catholic is no longer the prevailing definition. Many of the leaders of the Episcopal Church, to which I belong, have chosen to adopt ideas that are not universally believed, are major shifts from what has been believed since antiquity, and are not in line with what a majority of other church teachers believe. The things that are changing have to do with how we read the Bible, and whether or not it's The Good Book or just another good book like the Koran. Church leaders are now changing what we say about Jesus, that he is one way to God, but not the way. Other leaders have done away with talk about miracles as unscientific, some have done away with the resurrection as unrealistic. There's a lot of new ideas out there, but that doesn't bother them much. We're told the Holy Spirit will lead us into new truths, even if those new truths contradict the age old teachings of Christians.

Later you can look at the quote in your inserts this morning, from a bishop of the Episcopal Church. Last week he said he

likes this church because if there are parts of the creed you don't agree with, you can just skip over them. The bishop then says it's just this sort of integrity and honesty that makes him proud of the church. I am hard pressed to find integrity in seeming to agree to beliefs that you don't hold. At least for those who are chosen to be leaders of the church. There's a double standard here to be sure. Those of you out there in the congregation are not expected to hold to the faith with the same kind of certainty as those of us ordained and set apart to teach the faith. You are welcome to ask questions and have doubts. But if the worship leaders don't believe what they're saying, what kind of integrity is that?

In the next 40 days there will be a lot of news in your papers about a growing disagreement over these issues between the Episcopal Church on one side, and a majority of the Anglican Church on the other. The Episcopal Church has been given until September 30 to say they will abide by what the rest of the church has agreed is the catholic faith and practice. Or else. We don't know or else what ... but there was an or else implied. The American bishops will meet next month. However, they have already spoken as a group to say they both want to be part of the Anglican Communion and yet want to be left to make their own decisions about the church's faith and practices. It's odd to want things both ways. It's a bit like the Denver Broncos saying that they want to be a part of the NFL. But since the air is so thin up at Mile High Stadium, they've decided that when playing in the Denver stadium you only have to go five yards to get a first down. Imagine how well that would go over ... Imagine too if the NFL told them they could not change the rules, the Broncos then said, but we're a separate franchise, owned and operated. You can't tell us what to do here. But one team can't change the rules for all the teams. If you want to play ball, you have to agree to the same rules as everyone else. It's hard to understand how Episcopal leaders can say they want to be a full member of the Anglican Church, of the holy catholic church, but then say they're free to change the rules as they see fit.

Yup, it gets confusing. It also gets personal. This week, twenty of my friends here in Northern Virginia were defrocked by our Bishop, Peter Lee. He has threatened to do the same to people like me if we do not go along with, and financially support, the direction of the Bishops. I have friends who are volunteers in these churches who are being sued by the Bishop because of property disputes over church buildings. Over a million dollars has been spent on legal fees this year for these actions. Our church leaders, the Vestry, also received a letter in December threatening them with lawsuits if they did not follow the lead of our Bishops. But what if the Bishops lead away from what the church has taught? That's the problem here. That's why the rest of this year will be an uncomfortable one for me. We do not talk much about all these controversies here in church because I prefer to teach about Jesus. I just wanted you to know there's stuff happening, and it will have an effect on me, it may effect our Vestry and in some ways it may effect you. That's yet another reason I want nothing more than to be a catholic.

As someone who believes in the catholic faith, I know where

I stand on the essentials. Certainly there have been times when the church has spoken poorly, or missed all that the catholic faith could say and do. History is full of examples of how the church has not been perfect. I'm not defending everything the church has done over the centuries. That's not God's fault. Only it's not the truth of our faith that was the problem so much as the church's inability to follow through. Bad things happen when we are not faithful to what God has taught us. That's true for churches. It's also true for you and me as individuals. That's what this summer's message series has stressed over and over. Your beliefs matter. They change your behaviors. Ultimately your behaviors will determine your destination. So you'll want to make sure of your beliefs, folks. Let's get practical now. What difference does any of this really make to you? Let's quickly look at three challenges you face ...

(1) Here at *The Spirit* we will continue to teach the faith in Jesus that has been believed by all people in all places at all times. We will hold firm to the creeds. When the Bible speaks we will listen, and where it is silent, we're not going to make stuff up. And above all, we believe the Spirit will lead us deeper into the one real truth, not into new truths, or things that contradict what God has already shown us to be true. Your challenge is to continue to grow in your understanding of God's ways. Going to church does not save you. Just being baptized is not enough. It's about what you believe and how you behave. That's what God is watching.

(2) Sometimes the catholic faith will lead you in a direction that's not the same as what our culture teaches us is true. I'm not talking about differing views of creation and evolution. That's a fine discussion for another day. Instead we see a clash for instance between what our culture and our faith says about things like how we spend money and how well we do at caring for the needy. Conspicuous consumption sure seems sinful when people in other places die for lack of inoculations that cost less than a quarter each. Do you really need to spend as much money on yourself as you do? There's another clash between the culture's view on hooking up, on short term sexual relationships, on the single life, and with what the Bible teaches about these things. Which is true? Often, the catholic faith offers you the inconvenient truths about the issues you'd rather have updated, like views on divorce and remarriage, views on who Jesus is and what he did and what he means to us all. When something the church teaches does not seem to fit nicely with my life, I am challenged first to ask why ... and to look for God's challenge to leave behind what I think is best for what he's shown to be best. And each time I have done that in the past, and especially in those times when I ignored God's ways for my own, I have come learned just how much more wisdom there is in God's ways.

Let me ask you this: Where does faith in God challenge you to change what you believe and how you behave? How often are you tempted to try to change (or perhaps just ignore) what Christianity teaches because you're sure your life would be better without God's guidelines? Be honest, how often have you found yourself in trouble precisely because you didn't follow God's lead?

There were those things you said you wish you could take back, things you said after having one or two too many drinks ...

There was that relationship which broke down after you moved in together, leaving you not knowing the best way to break up and move on ...

There was the person you hurt because you were in too much of a hurry to have things your own way ...

There were those times when you cut corners at work, or when you bent the truth, only to have everything boomerang back at you ...

Folks the catholic faith is not meant to be a straightjacket that keeps you from living or thinking. It's a foundation that helps you get free of the stupid, human, mistakes we're apt to make without God's guidance. Jesus taught that when you know the truth, the truth will set you free. Not free to choose what is true on your own. No, the truth of God is a starting point that gives you the freedom to live without fear, without despair, without those dumb mistakes. Your challenge here is to accept no substitute for the truth of God.

(3) Finally, belonging to a catholic church means belonging to something that's bigger than you and me. It's bigger than a church or a denomination. It's the one big thing that is truly meant to be universal, for all. God promised he would pour out his Spirit upon all people. Jesus said a time was coming when people from all over the world would take their rightful places in the kingdom of God. Even some folk you'd never expect ... And the Bible also tells us that we are one body, and if one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. Put those together and you see our faith, our church, was meant to be much bigger. And until it is, there's work to do.

There's work to do to meet the suffering we see. I understand you can't cure the world's hunger or poverty issues. But you can do something. Yesterday I took my son to the movies. We saw *The Bourne Ultimatum*, and since it was the opening weekend, the theater was fairly full. A few minutes before the film began a man walked in, about 6 foot tall and 400 pounds. He walked with a cane. It was hard to miss him as he came in. He stood in front of one of the sets of chairs set aside for those who are disabled, but the chairs were full. He asked the people sitting there to move but they wouldn't. He started to get angry. "So how many of you are disabled? Don't you know these seats are reserved for the disabled? You mean none of you are going to move?" And they didn't. Here were a bunch of affluent, educated folk from the suburbs who had chosen the most convenient seats and could not be bothered with someone else's needs. Man, it made me very angry. Before I could move, another couple in the row in front of me moved to let the man have their seats. It took a lot of resolve not to get up and yell "How dare you," to the uncaring people who would not move. I'm also mad that I didn't move faster to try to help, but just sat there watching. The big guy must have felt all alone in a theater full of people

who didn't care. There's supposed to be a remedy for people who need help. To belong to a catholic faith means taking a stand for others. As God explained, "for when one member of the body hurts, we all hurt." To be catholic means to be on the lookout for those who are hurting.

There's also work to be done in inviting others into the body. Too many people try to live without God. Maybe you've done that. Maybe people in your family are trying to do that. Even so, God offers to fill them with his Spirit, if they would only open up to God. There's your next challenge as a catholic. Remember how Jesus said a lot of people would come from all over to take their place in the kingdom? Well, your role is to help them find the door in, just as much as if you watched someone fall overboard, and had a life preserver nearby. Who among you would refuse to throw a line to someone sinking over their heads? And yet each day we meet people like that, over their heads in worry, or financial problems, or in their marriages, or with their kids. And you have the line that can save them. All you need do is take a deep breath and offer it. Try listening to others, and responding simply: "It seems like you're having a hard time right now. Would it be OK if I prayed for you?" or how about, "You sound like you're having a hard day. Sometimes what helps me most is getting back in touch with God. If you're interested you could meet me at my church this week ..."

So when one member of the body suffers, we all suffer in some way. But so too, when someone in the body rejoices, we all can rejoice too. When some of us reach out to build a habitat house, we can all rejoice. When someone else sends kids from Koinonia to school with new shoes, we can all rejoice. When someone forgives the person who hurt them, or prays for their neighbor who's in trouble, or who seeks some way to serve without seeking recognition, we can all rejoice. For in that moment we are living out our faith together in the way it was intended since the beginning, in all places and by all people.

Take me

*Take these arms and use them
to embrace the broken hearted
Take these eyes and help them find
the ones that need your love
Move these feet so those you seek
might somehow find the way
Make the words I say become
the words that you would say
Take me, I am yours ...
Help the world see you in all I do
Take me, help me be ...
Everything that you would have me be
Take me, Lord*