

**Sunday Sermon**  
**July 9, 2017**  
**“Holy What? Communion of Whom”**  
**Galatians 3:26-29, I Corinthians 1:2-9**

Introduction:

I came to this position from fourteen years in the flatlands of eastern North Carolina. Up to this week, the biggest climb I had made here was pretty much the climb into this pulpit. Then on Tuesday of this week, I was recruited to hike with our youth Mission Team on a hike up Table Rock Mountain. Doug Veazey, experienced hiker and trail volunteer, was recruited as our guide.

Before we started, Doug went over some rules: Stay on the trail. No shortcuts. No littering. Stay with the group as there could be bears on the trail. I remembered years ago, hiking in Alaska, we were taught that if you encounter a bear, you should circle up as a group and hold your hands or backpacks up high to make yourselves look larger to the bear.

The hike from the parking lot to the top of Table Rock is only one mile, or at least that is what the sign says. I figured I could climb for a mile, especially with the walking stick Doug loaned me. So we started on the trail. The ten youth scampered over the rocks. Doug went on ahead, and I offered to take the rear, taking each rock one step at a time and checking the bushes for bears.

The group was really quite considerate. About every quarter of a mile, they would stop to make sure I was still back there somewhere and let me catch up.

Finally, we made it to the top. I sat down on the rocks as far from the edge as possible, while Doug took the youth over to the side to show them peaks and landmarks.

“You should come see this,” Doug called. “There’s a fairly large black bear down below, about 100 feet from the trail.”

“You mean the trail we have to go on to get back to the cars?” I asked.

“Yes,” Doug said, and turning to the group continued, “We should go so we can get down past that bear.” And the group struck out with Doug behind them.

“Oh, one more thing I should tell you about an encounter with a bear,” Doug said as he was about to disappear out of sight, “You don’t need to be able to outrun the bear, you just need to be able to outrun the slowest hiker on the trail.” And suddenly I found my hiking legs.

I.

In worship this summer, we are looking at the Apostle’s Creed and what we profess when we say it. And you are still coming to worship!

We have come to the end of the creed where we list the “I believe ins.” This week we look at “I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.”

Now it is often explained that the word catholic, used here with a lower case “c,” means “universal,” and that, therefore, it refers to the presence of the church throughout the world. But there is more to it than that. The word “catholic,” literally means “according to the whole,” so what makes the church catholic is not just its presence everywhere, but the fact that people from everywhere participate in it and contribute to it.(1)

Our Protestant Presbyterian friends in Northern Ireland have said they do not understand why on March 17 in the US, everyone wears green and celebrates Saint Patrick. “That’s right,” we said. “Everyone in the U.S., regardless of his or her heritage, on March 17 is Irish Catholic.”

And now I understand you can travel most anywhere in the world and see green on March 17. Green lights on pyramids and the sphinx in Egypt, the opera house in Sydney, Australia, the little mermaid in Copenhagen, Denmark, Niagara Falls at the Canada/US border, and even the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Yes, on March 17 everyone, including Jesus, is Irish and celebrates a saint of the Catholic Church.

So I guess you could say the celebration of Saint Patrick’s Day is little “c” catholic, “according to the whole,” because people from everywhere take part and contribute to the celebration.

## II.

Our readings today come from someone who was not Irish Catholic, but Jewish, an Israelite who traced his lineage to Jacob. The apostle Paul’s DNA went all the way back to the Tribe of Benjamin. Paul described himself as a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a righteous Pharisee devoted to the law, a zealous persecutor of the church. Then one day on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Paul met the Lord in a vision. And he realized all his credentials were useless compared to new life in Christ.

In his new life, Paul’s focus changed from persecuting churches to planting churches. And he taught them what it means to be the church according to the whole. Paul wrote to believers at Galatia and Corinth you are all children of God, all called to be saints, together with all those who in every time and place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are the church according to the whole.

In the Cloisters Museum in New York, there is on display a beautifully carved Romanesque lintel, the post over the doorway, from some ancient French church. It was the sculpture that people saw as they went into the church. You can tell it is a depiction of Palm Sunday, because everyone in the sculpture is holding a palm branch.

At the head of the procession is, of course, Jesus, riding a donkey. Behind and around him, you can see the little children waving their branches, followed by adults. All of them are dressed in the Near Eastern dress of the first century.

But surprisingly, just behind those adults, blending in with the procession, is another group of adults. And they are not dressed in first century Near Eastern garb. Rather, they are wearing twelfth century European clothing. There is someone who looks like a shopkeeper, there is a butcher, and a number of women.

And you realize this is a picture of what it is like to enter the church. When we enter the church, we take our place in a procession of believers of all kinds and all ages. And here is what is interesting: The believers in that procession and all processions are neither morally pure nor perfect. Yet, for centuries we have confessed that the church is holy. How can it be holy, h-o-l-y, if it is according to the whole, w-h-o-l-e, of sinful participants? Only through the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Read the preface to *Life High the Cross*, the book about the history of this congregation, and you will find the statement, "In the pages that follow, you will read of saints and sinners, triumph and tragedy, crisis and commitment. Underneath it all you will distinctively recognize the presence of God."

#### Conclusion:

We Protestant Presbyterians may not believe in venerating saints, but we believe that we are called to be saints to each other, called to live lives that exemplify Christ. And we hike this journey together. We hike as a group in communion where everyone participates and contributes. We help each other; we respect each other's gifts and limitations; we leave no one behind. And when we are threatened, we circle up, and we find that together our faith is made bigger and stronger.

As we recite words we say we believe, let us be challenged to pray for others and ourselves, to serve others in need, to study God's word, and to worship together, so that we may indeed be God's holy catholic church, the communion of saints in the world, everyone participating, according to the whole. Amen.

#### Notes:

Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Apostles' Creed for Today*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007, p. 79.