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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Pentecost & Confirmation Sunday, May 20, 2018
 Texts: Romans 12:1-8; Acts 2:1-21

The Odd Broad Church

Today we celebrate church, the church that was born on Pentecost, fifty days after the first Easter, and which has flourished for nearly 2,000 years. The church--there's a lot we could say about the church, but I want to focus on two words. Every time we recite the Apostles Creed we use these two words to describe the church. Pop quiz: What are these two adjectives which describe the church in the Apostles Creed? Answer: holy and catholic. "I believe in ... the holy catholic church." What in the world do we mean when we say the church is holy and catholic?

Let's start with holy and begin with what we do not mean. To say that the church is holy is not to say that it is filled with morally perfect people. Every sin that can be found outside the church can also be found in it. From the headline scandals of mega-church pastors accused of sexual misconduct, to the garden variety transgressions of jealousy and gossip, the church is not exempt from sin. So, the church is not holy in the sense of morally perfect.

Neither is it morally superior. We probably all know people who would not call themselves Christian who have more integrity than some of the most dyed-in-the-wool believers. The church and its members aren't better than other people, though, much to the amusement or disgust of those outside the church, to be sure, it has some members who think they are better. Sanctimonious is the word that describes those Holier-than-thou types. While sanctimonious comes from the Latin root *sanctus* (holy), it's not what we mean when we say the church is holy.

So, the church's holiness isn't moral perfection nor moral superiority. It does have something to do with God's holiness, i.e. God's goodness and God's ongoing process of forming that goodness in us, what we call sanctification. God's holiness and our sanctification are important aspects of the church's holiness.

But what I want to emphasize today is an angle of holiness which we could call oddness. To be holy is to be odd. It is to be different. It is to be set apart. The Greek word in the New Testament that gets translated as "church" literally means "called out." The church is the assembly of people who are "called out," chosen, set apart from the rest. It is its oddness, its God-given distinctiveness that makes the church holy.

Jesus in his prayer on the eve of his death prays for the churchⁱ, the ones God has given him. They belong to God and not to the world, he says. They are distinct from the world, and that distinction merits the world's hatred. "Sanctify them," Jesus prays, that is, set them apart. Set them apart not for special honor and privilege and reward. Set them apart for your work. Set them apart to point to you as the source of truth and life. Set them apart as ambassadors or apostles sent into the world to proclaim the gospel.

The church is holy because we belong to God and not the world. Peter says we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.ⁱⁱ Paul says we are citizens of heaven.ⁱⁱⁱ Will Willimon calls the church resident aliens.^{iv} The church is holy because it is called out from the

world, distinct from the world, ordained as the world's priests, if you will--a colony of oddballs. We march to a different drummer. We follow a different Lord.

One of my favorite movies is "Witness." Harrison Ford plays a tough Philadelphia cop who winds up taking cover in an Amish community in rural Pennsylvania. In order to stay in hiding, this worldly-wise, gun-toting city detective must don hand-sewn clothes and take up farm life, blending into a culture totally foreign to what he has known. The Amish community is a community of simplicity, shunning modern technology. It is a community of sharing, complete with barn-raising and dinner on the grounds. It is a community of total nonviolence. In one scene Harrison Ford watches in utter disbelief as an Amish man who has gone into town gets teased by a bratty teenager. When the teen daubs his ice cream cone in the Amish farmer's face, the farmer remains perfectly calm, hands to his side, and literally turns the other cheek. The movie's title, "Witness," has multiple meanings, but one of them is the fact that these Amish Christians witness to their faith by the odd way they live, odd by the standards of our modern world.

I suppose it is the particular calling of the Amish to live in the distinctive way they do, as perhaps it is for monks, but for the rest of us in the church, we are set apart from the world but must not be cut off from the world. We are supposed to be different, but that doesn't mean we're aloof. We are in the world, but not of the world. In this way we are holy.

Jesus says we are salt, and leaven, and light in the world. The problem comes if the salt loses its saltiness, the yeast is beyond the expiration date, and the bulb grows dim. What happens when the church looks no different from the world? What happens when the church is no longer following Jesus Christ but is instead following the Pied Piper of Accommodation?

As someone has queried, "If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

Worldliness is a hard habit to break. "Do not be conformed to this world," Paul begs the congregation in Rome. Because when the church is only a health club, a book club, a service club, and a dining club indistinguishable from a fitness gym, a library, a civic group, and a bunch of friends who meet to eat, then it ceases to be the church. When the church blends in to its surrounding culture and parrots the same prejudices, the same idolatries, the same lusts, then it's good for nothing. When the church doesn't have a different word to say to the world, is not hated by the world, doesn't get any push-back from the world, something is wrong. It may be a nice and comfortable place, but it is no longer holy, no longer odd.

I have a good friend who is a vegan. She eats no meat or fish, nor eggs, nor dairy, not even jello. She doesn't own a pair of leather shoes or a leather belt, much less a fur coat. If it comes from a creature that has eyes, she says, she doesn't consume it. Her chosen diet is not for health reasons, but for ethical reasons. She isn't preachy or showy about it. She just quietly goes about her vegan lifestyle, inconvenient as it is. But, I must say, the integrity of her witness is very powerful. The integrity of the church's nonconformity is also very powerful, and is our calling.

The church is holy in its oddness.

Now for the second word which describes the church in the Apostles' Creed: catholic. To call the church catholic is to acknowledge that the church is bigger than just us.

A woman died and went to heaven. She found everything as she expected: picturesque landscapes, perfect sunsets, and infinite tranquility. Only one thing puzzled her: a high wall, far

off in the distance.

“What’s behind that wall?” she asked St Peter.

“Oh, that’s where we put the Baptists,” he replied. “They think they’re the only ones up here.

To call the church catholic is to affirm that we don’t have a monopoly on church. Note that “catholic” is here spelled with a little “c.” When “Catholic” is spelled with a capital “C” it refers to our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic church. “Catholic” with a little “c” means universal or world-wide.

I think we get a big clue about catholic character of the church in the story of Pentecost in Acts. From its beginning, the church has included people from every nation under heaven, with their different languages, and cultures, and ways of doing things. We can say that the catholic church is broad.

When I think just how broad, many rich images come to my mind. I think about my junior year of college studying overseas. Over spring break on a small Greek Island around sunset I went for a walk. I passed many family compounds, each with a tiny whitewashed, stuccoed building with a dome with a cross on top. I spied an open door in one of these family chapels. A short, plump woman in a head scarf beckoned me in. I wanted to tell her that I, too, was a Christian and that this day was my Easter, though I knew Easter fell differently on the Greek Orthodox calendar that year. I spoke not a word of Greek nor she any English. But through lots of pointing and gesturing she understood. She opened her arms, reached up, and gave me a big hug.

When I think of the catholic church I think about an overnight stop-over I had near Amsterdam while flying to Russia in 1992 with the Friendship Force, a citizen-to-citizen exchange to promote world peace. On Sunday morning, near my hotel, I found a Dutch Reformed church. Despite the language barrier, I felt quite at home. The order of worship was just like here. And it was their confirmation Sunday. The nervous teenagers stood before the congregation like ours will do in a bit. After they professed their faith, we all rose and said the Apostles’ Creed, they in Dutch, and I, reciting it softly in English—“I believe in ... the holy catholic church.”

When I got to Russia, my host took me to a Russian Orthodox service. The church was dimly lit by candlelight. There were beautiful paintings of Bible figures and saints that covered the iconostasis in front. The bearded priest wore gold brocade robes, a crown-like headdress, and chanted from a large gilded book. There were no pews. The congregation, mostly old women in black, stood for the whole three hour service. We only stayed a little while, but long enough for me to recognize that despite the vast differences, this, too was Christ’s church.

When I think of the catholic church I think of the past month here in Athens. During this time, I have led a prayer at a service at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the next block, co-officiated at a wedding with a Roman Catholic priest, and attended a funeral at a Southern Baptist Church. As different as each experience was, each is a reminder that the church, the catholic church is so much bigger than just our part of it. There are many members of the body of Christ, and as Paul counsels, we ought not to think too highly of ourselves. Christ’s church is very broad.

So, you are part of the holy catholic church, or what I might call the odd broad church. It is a challenge to be holy, i.e. to be distinct, set apart, nonconforming. And it is humbling to

be catholic, i.e. to be part of something bigger, to be inclusive, to know we don't have a corner on God. I believe--we believe--in the holy catholic church. Go, then, and be odd and broad for God!

ⁱ John 17:6-19

ⁱⁱ I Peter 2:9

ⁱⁱⁱ Philippians 3:20

^{iv} *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)