

**August 7, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

**‘The Holy catholic Church’**      **Acts 2:38-47**  
**Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore**

*Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.*

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:38-47*

This morning I’ll begin this sermon with a different question than the one I’ve been asking you thus far all summer. Today, rather than asking you to pick a scene from the Bible that you’d like to revisit in person, a time in Jesus’ ministry you’d like to witness first hand, try this one on for size.

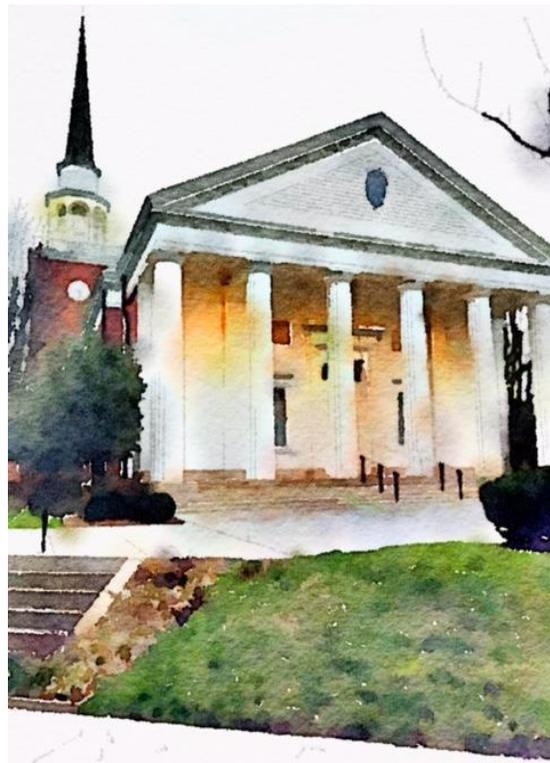
Because the theme of today’s sermon is ‘The Church’, something that we all here know a thing or two about, one way or another, let me ask you this: who are the people, for you, who make up the church?

Remember this? “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple... open the doors, and see all the \_\_\_\_\_.” Without people, there is no church. So, who, for you, is church?

Think back through your life, or think about the way things are now... Who, for you, is church? What did these people do to embody ‘church’? How did they trust you? Impress you? Challenge you? Teach you? Mentor you? Inspire you? Guide you?

I’ll give you some time now to think about this; to let some names, faces and memories start to come back to you.... Take a couple minutes to do this—it’ll be worth it! [ ---- ]

If I may, I’d like to share a few things about the people who made up church for me... And I’m thinking about it this way



because next Sunday, my daughter Emma and I will be going to church with my Mom, back in my hometown... a beautiful little church in Stroudsburg, PA, with wonderful stained glass windows- a 'family church,' as it were, where I know that Emma's 'Grammy' will be wanting to show her granddaughter off to everyone there— and they'll all say "Look how tall she is! (...and what beautiful red hair!)"

Just thinking about Zion United Church of Christ, where I grew up, takes me back....

I first think about my Aunt Evelyn, who played the piano in Sunday school and taught Bible stories with flannel graph characters. I can still see the friends of the sick man lowering him through the roof of the house to see Jesus. (Remember that one?)

Then there was Victor Koch, Sunday school superintendent, who led everyone together in a Hymn Sing for 15 minutes, before we all went off to our separate Sunday school classes. His voice wasn't all that great, but he sure got everyone singing!

Our Pastor took me through confirmation class, two school years of Saturday mornings in the church basement, going through the Heidelberg Catechism. I have to admit that I learned a lot from him.

Lastly was the Rev. Sam Huffard, the Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of East Stroudsburg, (where I ended up attending later in high school, and when I'd go to when I was home from college), whose sermons were entirely captivating to me.

He was scholarly, very soft spoken (he didn't project at all, you had to listen to him VERY carefully)- and he told stories better than Garrison Keillor.

So, when I say I believe in the Holy catholic Church, my first point of reference goes back to those who taught me about Jesus and lived their lives accordingly... with kindness, fairness, understanding and love.

Of course, the church I grew up in wasn't perfect... none are.

In fact, in the year after my confirmation, when I was 14, we held a congregational meeting for the purpose of removing the Pastor.

As I remember it, at issue was the fact that he was starting up another church, a much more 'charismatic' one- on the side, with worship services on Wednesday evenings somewhere on the outskirts of town. The Consistory (the Session), wanted to nip this in the bud, and the congregation let him go- so that he could devote all his time to this 'new found love.' One Sunday he was there, the next he was not— so it goes in a Congregational Church!

The fact that everything was handled very matter-of-factly, with no real hostility or recriminations, must have made a big impression on me, because I have always understood the church to be a place of open dialogue, of stability and change when necessary, and sound decision making.

So with that as background, I can briefly cover the three key words that make up this portion of the Creed... Holy... catholic... and Church.

Here are some brief defining points. First, the church is 'Holy' because it is derived from God.

You can first think of the phrase 'Holy Land' (which is really not so much), but still, it points to where it is that God 'has been pleased to dwell,' where God has been clearly present, history has been made and lives have forever been changed because of it. It is similarly, through the church, that when we look carefully, we can see God in action with presence, history and changed lives, as well.

Just as that land over there across the sea is holy, this church over here is holy... and it is holy because the people in it are holy. We in this ship of faith, and the passengers long before us, too... Peter, Mary, James & Martha, Augustine, Luther, Teresa, Calvin, Zwingli, King, Parks, and a billion partners in faith today.

Most of all, the church is Holy because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in it.

That we believe in the Holy catholic Church is not understood in the same sense in which we believe *in* God the Father, or *in* Jesus Christ, or *in* the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we would lapse into idolatry and put our faith into that which is not divine. The Church is the vehicle we travel in; the ship of faith, as it were (architecturally, oftentimes a sanctuary can look like an upside-down sailing ship; ribs for arches above; just look up and see!)



The Church is an essential part of the Creed because it is in it that we experience faith, — we don't all experience it in the same way, but we still experience things together.

In spite of so much you hear and may read to the contrary, faith is never a purely private matter. Faith is always connectional. Faith is certainly personal in that each one of us needs to claim it for ourselves, but it is never private in the sense that it has nothing to do with the community of the faithful.

The word 'catholic' did not appear in the earliest form of the Creed (which is called the 'Roman Symbol', from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century.) It came from the Nicene Creed, written in 325 AD, and then migrated its way back, retroactively.

The word is a special way of referring to the 'church at large', or 'universal.' The word 'catholic' itself (with a lowercase 'c'- right?- technically means 'according to the whole'. So what makes the church 'catholic' is not its 'purity', or its presence everywhere, but rather the fact that people from everywhere are part of it and contribute to its makeup.

In a similar way we can also say that Holy Scripture itself is 'catholic', (not singular or monolithic), but complete, rich and varied in complexity and diversity. (Just think about the differences between the books of Genesis, the Psalms the Gospels and the letters.) The word 'catholic' has ALWAYS meant universal, in more ways than we think.

As far as the word 'church' goes (ekklesia), the Greek meaning of this refers to 'those called out' for a special purpose. Church people are different; no better or worse than others, but called for a purpose set in front of us - weekly. The church, for all its foibles and triviality, is our best hope of reaching upward and outward to God and those in need.

A quote from John Wesley, founder of Methodism (1743), is a good summary. "The church is a company of those united in order to pray together, to receive the word of

exhortation and to watch over another in love, that they may help one another to work out their salvation.”

The church is a body of which each one of us plays an important part...

A final illustration: I remember a church officer’s workshop that we did in Hendersonville, NC, led by a friend of mine. To have us begin to think about our particular role in the church, she outlined, on the fellowship hall floor, in masking tape- the form of a giant human body... head, shoulders, torso, arms & legs. After an opening prayer and an introduction to this “Body of Christ’ as it were, outlined on the floor before us, she asked each of us to silently move to the place, the body part, where we felt we were, as part of our congregation. It was an interesting, unforgettable session.... for you could not be exempt.

Some chose the pinky finger, some chose the kidneys or liver (processing a lot of stuff), some chose arm or leg muscles, a few occupied the cranium, but it was a gathering of Deacons I remember most, very shyly making their way just left of center in the chest region, who chose to reside in the heart.

It was there they gathered, and who were asked to lead us in prayer. And the prayer they shared was this: (given them by our facilitator)

“Lord Jesus, we give you our hands to do your work. We give you our feet to go your way. We give you our eyes to see as you do. We give you our mouths to speak your words. We give you our minds that you may think in us. We give you our spirit that you may pray in us. Above all, we give you our heart that you may love in us. We give you our whole selves that you may grow in us, so that it is you, Jesus who lives and works and prays in all of us. Amen.”



So may this be our prayer, too... in Jesus’ name. Amen.