

I Believe in the Church

[Matthew 28:16-20](#)

Guest preacher: Dr. Charles Bartow, Professor of Speech Communication, Princeton Theological Seminary

Sunday, February 18, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

What a joy it is for me and my wife Paula to be here and worship with you on this Lord's day, on the installation of our friend Doug Learned as your executive pastor is celebrated. Doug was a teaching assistant for Dr. G. Robert Jacks, my late beloved colleague, and Bob would have been proud and happy for this day. Let me too gratefully acknowledge the hospitality shown Paula and me by Doug and Cindy, your pastor and head of staff, Dr. Icenogle, and the pastors and staff of this great church. The welcome of National Capital Presbytery likewise is appreciated. Grace to you all and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: The long past echoes of your name in our ears of prophet and saint, apostle and martyr in the march of the years and the destiny of nations, even so now, in the foolishness of preaching, let us hear you, O God, speaking to us by your Son and in him, let us know you as you are entering this life of ours to bear yourself the weight of it, forever merciful in your judgment and just in all your compassion. This we pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints. That is not just my personal confession of faith, of course. It is our confession. It is the confession of the Presbyterian Church, USA; it is the confession of the communion of saints worldwide from apostolic times to our times, to times beyond our reckoning, which is what catholicity is all about. Earlier in complete formulation of the Apostles' Creed, from which this text is drawn, is the Nicene Creed, the most ecumenical of all creeds. It states our common confession of faith in these words: "We believe one holy catholic and apostolic church."

We do not invest our life in its entirety, which is what belief truly entails, in a building, in a culture, in a political or ecclesiastical party or ideology -- liberal, conservative, or democrat, moderate, republican, whatever it may be. We do not invest our life without reserve in a lifestyle of our own choosing and fashioning; nor do we invest the whole of our life in the preservation of our racial, ethnic, personal, or socioeconomic identity as though any of those things, however significant, were of ultimate concern. Much less do we believe in or invest our life -- lock, stock, and barrel -- in my kind of people, coffee klatch and friends, made popular decades ago by comedian, late-show host Jack Paar, which shows my age, though I can tell some of you would also remember. Instead, we invest our life in exercise of belief in and through the church and the communion of saints reaching back into ancient Israel and to First Century Galilee, and those earliest doubting and worshipping disciples and stretching ahead into the Twenty-first Century doubting, worshipping Washington, D.C., and beyond.

In that church and with those saints, and not apart from them, we invest our life, and we confess our faith in Christ Jesus, crucified, risen, regnant, who has said to us. We have heard him through the Scripture read this day "All authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me." It is thoroughly undemocratic; no election by us of Jesus as Lord, but Jesus' election of us as his church, and particularly Jesus' election of you with your pastors, Doug Learned among them to be, his church in this place. No matter you are wondering from time to time, what on earth might come of it in these days. This place and these perplexing times are yours to make disciples of all peoples, here and now, given into your care that ties in them in the name of the Father, or the Son, or the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that Christ commands. And there is no way to have done with that great commission but to fulfill it.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you," the Apostle John heard Christ Jesus say to the church. And so the Word of divine preemption has been passed down to us. Authority in apostolic times and in our times indicates precisely that of the supreme right to choose, to appoint to office, to command obedience. Being a church is not a garment we can don or doff. It is very life to us, life set apart to God in Christ in the power of the Spirit, which is what holiness is all about. Therefore, we confess one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. The church is not ours to make or break, and it certainly is not any preacher's or pastor's or executive pastor's to save or sink. It is Christ's to command. Just as our life itself is not simply ours to make of what we will, but is Christ's to make of what he will. Divine providence can be just that personal.

Jesus never said anything more incessantly nor insistently than this: that "those who seek to save their lives will lose it, but those who lose their lives for his sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will find it," will find life. So also St. Paul in faithful echo, "You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God, and Christ who is your life is revealed. Then you will be revealed also with him in glory."

Then Martin Luther King, Jr., on his way to Memphis and to martyrdom, you remember, walking bravely and truly and poignantly, that were men as a matter of fact free to live except they are ready to die for what and for whom they believe. Better than a church, any church, in any place, die for Christ's sake, than that it live for its own sake.

As church and in the communion of saints, we believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit. And with the communion of saints as Christ's church, we believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. As church, our very lives are put at risk, and only so are our lives made secure by him, unto whom all authority is given, in heaven and on earth. We do not believe the church one holy and apostolic because we believe in ourselves and our capacity somehow to make it so. Instead, as church, in the communion of saints, we believe in, we invest our life in Christ, who has invested his life in us.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

Then, this last and not least: "And remember I am with you always to the end of the age."

We do remember Christ's presence with us in word and sacrament, prayer and praise daily, and are sometimes glad and sometimes anxious thoughts; nightly, in the music that sings through our sorrows to mend our broken hearts. We do remember Christ Jesus' investment of his own divine life in our human life, his being with us and for us even when we would have none of him. St. Paul said, "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." The time is right at Golgotha -- can we ever forget it? -- when Christ Jesus, He who was already given all authority in heaven and on earth, was crucified. His disciples fled from him, save his mother and a handful of staunch women. Passersby mocked him, "Save yourself if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Roman power, figuring it had all authority in heaven and on earth, derided him and taunted his kinsmen, placing on his scorned and pierced brow, this epithet: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Meaning, take a look; it could happen to you. But nevertheless, that was God's peremptory strike at principalities and powers promoting terror. And what it was, it remains.

I have it on scholarly authority that the Romans three short decades, or even fewer, after Jesus' crucifixion, crucified hundreds in a day, up to 500 in a single day on ramps built all along the walls of Jerusalem. And there was God's Christ, himself the vanguard of that martyred host, not taking up the sword to do to his adversaries, but dying with the victims and loving, forgiving the victimizers. It makes no earthly sense, only heavenly sense. You could not have imagined it, though Christ himself called it the very best in good news, the Gospel. No one could have imagined it: this way, this truth, this life, the only life that leads to the Father. Truth assigned portion for a time, the scaffold for a time, the throne--that's the way 19th century poet, professor, and diplomat, James Russell Lowell, saw it: "Yet that scaffold sways the future," he wrote. And the future includes you and me, here and now, this very day and hour in this church, in this city.

Still, people mock the Christ. Still around the globe, hundreds in the day suffer persecution, even violent death, with him for that is his promise to be with them, always, in everything. No matter you and I may have trouble believing it, His being with them really. Martyrs themselves believed it until their last breath. So 20th century poet William Butler Yeats could speak of them: "You can reject an idea out of hand," he acknowledged, "but it is harder to dismiss a life." To quote Yeats exactly: "You can refute Hagel but not the saint." You can make light of Christ; heaven knows how many do these days, but Christ will not make light of you. He died for you, he lives for you, he reigns in power for you, he prays for you.

And the communion of saints, in the best of times and in the worst, attests his presence with you always, literally meaning all the days, to the end of the age. And we have, we are entitled to our doubts about it, but we also have cause for doubting our doubts. Therefore, we worship, and in our worship we signal the end of the age. We signal, that is, the end of pretended usurpation of divine rule by temporal principalities and powers, states, causes, and all manner of governing sovereignties. They are not eternal. And they are, none of them, beyond the accountability to the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, including those sovereignties to which we ourselves have sworn allegiance.

In the end, the terrorists, God deliver us, have fled the scenes of devastation they themselves have wrought when measures of counter-terror at last no longer are felt to be needed, and ancient rivalries and hatreds finally have spent all the fuels of anger, and lost their zeal for perpetrating the wars and rumors of wars of which we had been warned in the Holy Writ; and, when for the last time, the very last time, God grant our own personal secret infidelities that seep through our cleverest concealments to poison the springs from which other folks must drink.

Then we shall know what the prophets have known from old: that the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever. Then, too, we shall know that every baptism we have ever witnessed has signaled a cleansing to last an eternity because in it God has attested his own unrelenting love for the least and the lost, the souls soiled, and the seemingly God forsaken. Then we shall know that all the instruction in Christ's commandment we have provided, however clumsily at times, has been taken up by God's own spirit and made to benefit children and men and women in ways we cannot even imagine. Then we shall know that there is no lost good, and that there are no hopeless hopes, for the soul is God's implanted hope.

God never yet forsook the soul that trusted him indeed, so sings the hymn, and so your own soul sings it, as does mine, but now God's ministers and angels to keep our wishes poised, centered not in ourselves but in God, and in God's Christ who commanded us, who this day commissions us to remember his promise to be with us always, to the end of the age.

I believe in the church. You believe in the church. But here is where our investment of our life in Christ, through the church and the communion of saints, surely is anchored. Christ Jesus himself believes in, invests his own life in the church. To the end of the church, this church, may fulfill Christ's great commission to make disciples of all nations -- that means all ethnicities, all races, all persons, all bloods and souls that tie in them the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ commands. Just so, saints are made of sinners, and the communion of saints swells in joy to the glory of God. "Remember," Jesus says, "remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let us pray: To you, O God, our God, by the power at work within us that is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to you, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to walk all generations forever and ever. Amen.