

The Holy catholic Church & the Communion of Saints

DAVE BAST

“I am spiritual, but not religious.” This common phrase has become so ordinary in our time, it is almost a formal category. Check a box: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, spiritual but not religious. Which one are you? Well, for Christians, spiritual but not religious is a big problem, or at least it ought to be, because we believe in the Church, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints. At least, that is what our Creed says, and what it means is what we will explore today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and once again joining our program for this series is Dr. Sue Rozeboom. She is an assistant professor of liturgical theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, and we just like to call her Sue, so, welcome again, Sue.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Thank you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sue is joining us for this five-part series on the last section of the Creed, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the section of the Creed that begins with, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The next two lines are, “And we believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints,” and that will be the focus for this program.

DAVE BAST

I started out at the top talking about this phrase, which is really widespread today in our society, “I am spiritual but not religious,” but actually, for us, that is somewhat problematic isn’t it? For one thing, it is really a code expression meaning, “I don’t like the Church. I hate the Church. It is an institution. It is corrupt,” and all the rest.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, “I do it on my own.” Implied there is, “I don’t need a community. I am a Lone Ranger spiritual person just by myself, so I don’t need to be around other people.” And that, too, is problematic from a Christian point of view.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Unfortunately, oftentimes people who say, “I am spiritual but not religious,” like you said, it is taking a knock at the Christian Church in particular, and unfortunately, it could be that they have had an experience with the Christian Church that maybe is not the Christian Church at its best. Maybe it is a caricature of what the Christian Church could or should be at its best, as the work of the Holy Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Let's acknowledge it up front. Yes, of course churches are problematic. They all have problems; they are full of people, and people do not always live up to what we say we believe. So, we recognize that there can be hypocrisy, there can be failure. Churches can be cold and sometimes hurtful in what they do. But still, that is no really legitimate reason to blow off the whole Church. We say, as part of our Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints."

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Christian faith is, I will not say it is unique, because other world religions have some aspect of this as well, but the Christian faith is not a faith where a main practice is sitting on the ground with our eyes shut, meditating ourselves out of an awareness of this earth and of other people, and it is just me and the infinite, reciting a mantra or something. The Christian Church all along has been a community – and we will think about this more in the next segment – that God has called together. We are called to be with other people, warts and all, right? And as you said, Dave, none of us should want to excuse the mistakes that community makes; however, we are called to community. Also, before this program is done we will reflect on the Triune God. We believe God is a community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are supposed to imitate that in the Church. We are called to be communal because our God is communal.

DAVE BAST

We know that there is a lot of individualism in our culture today and an emphasis on freedom and personal choice, and all the rest. Frankly, individuals by themselves are not going to accomplish all that much. For all of our anti-institutionalism, it is institutions that have actually changed society. You think about the history of the Christian Church, it founded monasteries that provided care for the sick and the poor; that preserved learning; it created hospitals; it built institutions. It is the Church that today is putting in wells and feeding the hungry all across Africa, and it is the Church that produced a Martin Luther to launch spiritual reform, or a Martin Luther King to launch social reform. Those things only happen when an institution mobilizes. They do not happen by people who are sitting around being spiritual by themselves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Lone Rangers.

SUE ROZEBOOM

In the Church, to be spiritual is to be dynamic. In the mid 20th century, there was a hymn text that came out of England, "We know that Christ is raised and dies no more. Baptized in Him, we live an Easter life," and then, a few lines later, "The Holy Spirit shakes the Church of God." In the Church, to be spiritual is to be not passive but dynamic, and dynamic in community.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. It is so interesting to me, too; if you even just think of the arc of biblical narrative, when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified, the disciples scattered; they fled; they were in terror. Then, of course, Jesus is raised again three days later and immediately they start coming back together. They are all in one place. The two people who walked to Emmaus run back to Jerusalem once they encounter Jesus in the breaking of the bread and rejoin the disciples, and we see this coming together, and of course, it all will climax 50 days later at Pentecost when they are all together in one place, we are told, and then the Spirit is poured out and then they add to their number 3,000 that day. There seems to be this force of the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus that does the opposite of scattering us in our fear and sin and guilt and shame; it brings us together, and this seems to happen naturally as a result of being baptized.

DAVE BAST

The result of the Spirit's work. It is no accident or coincidence that right after we say we believe in the Holy Spirit, we move immediately to the Church. And so, the Church not only draws us together and creates community, but as you were saying, Sue, with that hymn text, it shakes us and moves us and sends us out and

makes us a kind of a catalyst; it makes us salt and light in the midst of the world. So, this is the Church, and this is what God is about, and this is what Jesus is building. So, if we are interested in what God the Father is doing, and what Jesus intends, and what the Spirit is active in bringing about, then we are going to care about the Church, and we are going to look at what are the characteristics of this Church in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast and Sue Rozeboom, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today, Sue and Dave, we are thinking about the two lines from the third section of the Apostles' Creed, a very ancient creed, used all over the world, "I believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints." I think in this segment of this program we want to think about, what does it mean, we believe in one holy catholic Church, that word catholic often causes confusion, so we will want to talk a little bit about what that means, but what does it mean when we say that the Church is one? I think these days everybody listening to this knows why that is a challenge to say, "The Church is one," because it sure does not look like one when you turn to the Yellow Pages or call up Google and search for area churches. The Church is not one; it is thousands of denominations and thousands of splinter groups all over the place. How can the Church still be one?

SUE ROZEBOOM

I think of what Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, in Chapter 4 he declares, ⁴"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all who is Lord over all and through all and in all." One! One! One!

DAVE BAST

Yes, seven times in two verses or three verses, there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, wow.

DAVE BAST

So, if we believe the Bible, and we say we do; that is one of the reasons we call this program Groundwork – we are digging into scripture – if we believe the Bible, then we accept the fact that there is only one Church, and therefore, the Church is one. But, we do have a problem with perceived reality out there in a world where there are 20,000 or 30,000 different denominations; nobody knows how many, really.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Something that has stirred my imagination and helped me in wrestling with understanding especially "one" and "holy" is something that I was taught by Henry DeMoor when I was in seminary, and that is that these characteristics are both gift and calling. So, yes, it is a gift. We are one in Christ; that is reality, and yet, we are human; we are fragmented; and so, we will not experience that profound unity until Christ comes again; and so, it is to us to receive the calling to express ourselves as one to the extent that we are able. So, it is both gift and calling.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think it is so important, too; we can lament all day, and maybe there is something to lament about, the fragmentation of the Church, particularly since the Reformation. I often said to my catechism class, "Hard to believe, but up until 1517, the Church basically just had the two branches, Orthodox and Catholic, and that was it." But now, of course, it has splintered. So, we can lament that; but I think, Sue, what you were saying is that from God's perspective, it is still one in so far as we believe in the one Lord Jesus, that Ephesians text that you just read, and I think we need to seize on every opportunity we can to recognize that commonness that cuts across Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Reformed, Methodist lines. Just recently, I had a conversation with somebody where I pointed out a new baptism agreement that came between the Protestants and the Catholic Church, that we will recognize each others' baptisms. I said, "Isn't that wonderful?" This

person immediately said, “Oh yeah, but look at all the things the Catholics still believe that we don’t believe.” Why key in on that? Let’s look for our unity first, and celebrate it where we see it. Yes, we have differences, and maybe we are not going to reunify as one denomination any day soon, but wherever we see signs of the Spirit giving us that unity of faith, we should celebrate it, because I think that is what is the most important to God.

DAVE BAST

And you know Paul, here in this text, roots the unity of the Church in the Nature of God; is there more than one God? Is there more than one Lord Jesus? Is there more than one faith or baptism? No, the answer is no. So, there cannot be more than one Church. This idea that it is also a calling, yeah, we are not there yet, but we need to be working toward this. Jesus prayed, as you guys both know, I know, in His High Priestly Prayer, John 17:

^{11b}“Father, that they may be one as You and I are one.” So, somehow the unity of the Church will reflect the beautiful unity of the life of the Trinity, and it ought to be something that we are striving for, that means more to us. But, in a sense, holiness is the same deal, isn’t it? It is a gift, but we are not there yet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, there too, Sue, a gift and calling. That we are the holy catholic Church, and on any given day when you might say that to somebody, that we have a holy catholic Church in this world, they would say, “Really? I have seen a lot of unholy activity going on in the Church.” We do confess that that is true, but our holiness results in our unity with Christ, our being united with Christ in our baptism, and that unity thickened through the Lord’s Supper; so, that is the gift part. We do not have to be holy on our own, but it is also a calling, that we are supposed to be odd, different, set apart, called out. We are supposed to be children of a different bread, as they sometimes say, and that should distinguish us in our lifestyle and our viewpoints from the rest of the world.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Some might say, “Not the Church. I can’t do the Church. It’s a house full of hypocrites.” And you want to say, “Yes, we are. We are house full of hypocrites and there is always room for one more.” But, the opposite of a saint is not a sinner. This idea was recently put forth to me and it gave me pause: the opposite of a saint is not a sinner. The opposite is really a self-righteous hypocrite. The opposite of a saint is not a sinner because in Christ we are both saint and sinner here and now.

DAVE BAST

Simul justus et peccator.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Exactly right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Simultaneously justified and sinful.

DAVE BAST

You had better unpack that as our resident theologian, Sue.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Oh, boy. Well, we are made holy in Christ. This holiness... we share Christ’s righteousness. This is a gift, but then the Spirit also calls us to live into that holiness, but it is not going to be done perfectly; not here and now. So, we are both saint and sinner.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the first thing a saint knows is that it is not about me. The first thing a saint knows is that it is all Jesus, it is all grace, it is all good because it is all a gift of God. Saints do not become saints by achievement; they

get there the same anybody gets there and that is just by baptism and by grace.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Right. So, could we say that the opposite of a saint is one who does not assent to, or refuses the work of Christ, the one by whom we are made righteous?

DAVE BAST

Yes. There is a great line from the Episcopal preacher, Fleming Rutledge, in a sermon on Romans 5:8: God demonstrates His love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. She says, "I recognize myself in that word, 'sinner.'"

SUE ROZEBOOM

Amen.

DAVE BAST

And so do we all, and I think the only way, maybe, you can avoid becoming a saint is to refuse to recognize yourself as someone who needs God's grace, God's love, to become a saint.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just one last term before we close out this second segment of this program: Holy catholic Church. Because the largest denomination, if you want to call it that, is the Roman Catholic Church, sometimes people get confused, "If I am not a Catholic, why would I say 'Catholic' in the Apostles' Creed?" Well, it is a small c. Not the capital C Catholic of the church headed by the Pope in Rome, but catholic in the small c sense of being universal; that in God's view the Church is one, it is gifted to be and called to be holy, and it is finally one. The Church in Heaven and the Church on earth; all of those who are truly in Christ, all of those who are truly saved, that is the catholic Church in the sense of being universal.

SUE ROZEBOOM

In our worship, our communion prayers often set this before us in a profound way. In the midst of our communion prayer, we say, "So, O God, with the whole Church on earth and with all of the company of Heaven, we worship and adore Your glorious name; holy, holy, holy God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of Your glory."

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is the catholic Church, not just on earth, but in Heaven.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Exactly...

DAVE BAST

And we are all united around one Lord, one God, one Spirit, and one Table, and it is all about worship in the end; that is what really unifies us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we are, as we will think about as we come back, also the communion of the saints. We will talk about that in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee.

SUE ROZEBOOM

And I am Sue Rozeboom.

DAVE BAST

Once again, welcome, Sue, to our program. We are talking about the Church and its nature; it is one, holy, it is catholic, it is universal, it is also the communion of the saints. It is a fellowship. The great Bible word for that in the New Testament is *koinonia*, and Sue, there is a classic text that uses that word. Read that for us, would you?

SUE ROZEBOOM

This is Acts 2, so you might remember this is immediately after the Holy Spirit has been sent. Peter has proclaimed his extraordinary sermon; and following on this, those who were cut to the heart devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.
⁴⁴All of the believers were together and had everything in common, ⁴⁵selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as that person had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there we see something we refer to earlier in this program, that no sooner did Jesus rise again from the dead, and then most certainly 50 days later when the Spirit is poured out in power at Pentecost, people come together. They are not scattering apart anymore. They are not Lone Ranger individualists. They have a need to come together, and one of the things that we referred to, Sue and Dave, earlier is that there is some profound theology going on here because we believe that what is happening in Christ is that we are being renewed in the image of God, and one of the things that the Church has said about the image of God traditionally is that we are being made in the image of the Triune God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this never-ending, eternal relationship together. So, if we are going to look like God, and we are going to get renewed into the image of God through Jesus, who is the image of God par excellence, then it will only make sense that that is going to happen, not individually with me on a desert island, but in community. We are a community; a communion, even as God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are a communion. It is fitting, somehow. It all makes sense.

SUE ROZEBOOM

It really does harken back to the creation, doesn't it? God creates and breathes life into that which God has created, and then, it is not good for this one to be alone, so God creates community for this one. It is as if, as the Scottish Presbyterian theologian and very gentle pastor, James B. Torrance, once said, "God is in the business of creating community."

DAVE BAST

Yes, male and female He created them. The term, "man," which is often no longer used because of other issues, but generically, "man" is not just a male. It is male and female together constitute what it means to be human. God is in the business of restoring this; just as Pentecost is the reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel when humanity was fragmented and fractured and all sorts of ethnic tensions and divisions came in. The Church is God's great new society, as John Stock calls it, where He is reintegrating and bringing back, and communion is the sign of that. You think of that word, *koinonia*, and it means commonness, and all of the English synonyms that we have for that, like community, even communism; and we see a little bit of that in Acts 2.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and you know what Jesus came to do. What did sin do in the beginning, after God created the first male and the first female in the image of God in that relationship, what did sin do? Well, it turned us against each other. We started pointing fingers. Everybody was blaming everybody else. Cain kills Abel. Community falls apart. And above all, shalom was fractured. And Jesus came to restore us to shalom, and shalom is not just, “Oh, I have inner peace. I feel good about myself.” Shalom is the re-webbing together of all creation so that all creatures, all animals, all birds, all humans, everybody, and above all, everybody in relationship with God, were webbed together into mutually edifying and up-building relationships. So, it only makes sense that the result of Jesus’ work is to call together a community, flawed though we are to this day, we are called to community because that is what shalom means, the restoring of the original intent of creation.

SUE ROZEBOOM

Think about the Israelites gathered at Mount Sinai. God has given them this extraordinary gift of grace, freed them from bondage, and then God says again, “You are mine. You are my people, a holy people, a holy nation, my royal priesthood.” And then God gives them the Commandments. This is not a finger-waging, “Thou shalt live this way,” and see if you might measure up, but it is a picture of shalom. That is one way to think about the Ten Commandments. “Here you are; you are freed, now live in the joy of this freedom. Live well. Live this way.”

DAVE BAST

Which is to say, there is something for you to do; it is both gift and calling, and we need to be about this business of creating communities of shalom, making our churches what God intends them to be. It makes me think of a real-life illustration of this in a particular congregation. Now, a little bit of background here. Most of our listeners may not know this, but Scott and I are the regular co-hosts, actually are from different denominations. They are very close, they are very similar, but they are separate and they have been separate for 150 years or more, and there is a congregation in the town of Holland, Michigan, which has recently become a symbol of reconciliation, and even reunion. It was originally a Reformed Church, my denomination; it became a Christian Reformed Church, Scott’s denomination. In 2012, it decided to say, “We want to belong to both.” Now, when the original church split happened – it is called Pillar Church because of its very striking, old historic building – the majority voted to leave and join the Christian Reformed Church, and the elders chained the church door shut with steel chains and guarded the church with ax handles so that none of the minority would come in and try to steal the building back.

Well, fast forward to 2012, when they said, “We are going to belong to both denominations now. We are going to make our congregation...” It was work. They had to follow the law and work it out and follow their calling, and when you go into that church now for worship, and you enter at the back, they have a new baptismal font symbolizing that one baptism. It is a beautiful bowl. It sits on a pedestal. Around the base of the bowl there is a steel chain and the legs of the pedestal are made of ax handles, so that, as everyone goes in, they are reminded of the history, but they are also shown, “Here is where we are now. We are one in Christ.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is surely a big part of what we mean when we say in the Creed, “I believe in the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints.”

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, along with our guest for this series, Sue Rozeboom, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into the scriptures, so visit our website: It is groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future programs.

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