

Today we're having a retro service celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

Today in the midst of our 6-week series on the creeds, I'm focusing on the statement that we believe in "one holy catholic and apostolic church."

Protestant. Catholic. Of course, this is nothing new for us. As Episcopalians, we are reformed, we are a Protestant church. Yet of all the Protestant bodies, we've retained the greatest percentage of Roman Catholic doctrine and worship. As Episcopalians, we've often been called a bridge church between Protestantism and Catholicism. In fact, some scholars of Christianity regard us as neither Protestant nor Catholic, but a rather a unique hybrid of the two. Thus we're sometimes classified as a separate group within Western Christianity, a distinctive body that is not strictly Protestant, nor Catholic, but a unique Anglican fusion that attempts to combine the best of both.

So why are we celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation today? And why are we celebrating our identity as a part of Christ's church, that we proclaim is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic?

Let me make a run at the second question first.

One, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Those 4 words in the Nicene Creed are sometimes termed the "four marks" of the church.

Catholic is the word that often jumps off that list for many people—that's often the word that people notice first. What does that word mean?

Catholic is a word that comes from Greek: *katholikos*, a word that means "universal" or "part of the whole."

To say we're part of the catholic church, lower case "c" is to say we're part of the whole church of Jesus Christ.

What can make it confusing is that there are some churches who use the word "catholic" as part of the proper name describing their church. The Old Catholic Church. The Apostolic Catholic Church. The Polish National Catholic Church. The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. The largest group using this as part of their name is the Roman Catholic Church.

But the Roman Catholic Church is not the only church that is part of the universal or whole Church of Jesus Christ. It's just a name that's used to describe them.

For that matter, the Baptists are not the only Christian group that baptizes. The Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ are not the only groups who seek to follow Jesus Christ. I am an ordained presbyter though I'm not part of the Presbyterian Church. Episcopalian comes from a word that means bishop, but we're not the only church with bishops.

Thus, while we're not Roman Catholics, we are all part of the universal, or catholic, or whole church of Jesus Christ. We're not saying the Nicene Creed with our fingers crossed here. We do believe the church is catholic.

We also say it is one, holy, and apostolic.

ONE—we are part of the one body of Christ in spite of our human divisions and disagreements and factions. When we baptize, we remind ourselves of what is said in Ephesians about the church:

"There is one Body and one spirit; there is one hope in God's call to us; one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all."¹

HOLY—that's a word that means that we are set apart to be something different. It does not mean we're perfect, nor that we're free from sin. We're just designated to be different.

In football, 5 of the offensive linemen are designated as ineligible to be receivers. They have a different designation and a different role in the game. In the same way, God designates the members of his church to be different, holy, set apart for him.

APOSTOLIC—that means that we are in continuity with the apostles themselves, by following their teaching, by continuing to believe and continuing to do what the apostles did.

To say that we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church is to say that we believe that we are called to be part of the one universal body of Christ that is set apart from the rest of the world to carry on the teaching and ministry of the apostles.

We may experience divisions and disagreements. But we are all part of the one body of Christ, whether we call ourselves Roman Catholics or Baptists or Presbyterians or Episcopalians or Methodists or Church of Christ or Pentecostal. One body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for his followers that we all might be one.² In many ways, we are one. Though because of our human nature, we still experience divisions and disagreements.

In many different human organizations, it is difficult to strike a good balance between unity and diversity. If we stray too far to one side or the other we lose something vitally important. Stray too much toward diversity, and you lose any sense of what binds you together. Stray too much toward unity, and you start demanding conformity, and you miss out on the wonderful rich variety that exists in the human family.

As the Body of Christ, the church ideally is one holy catholic and apostolic.

¹ BCP p. 299; also Ephesians 4:4-6

² John 17:20-21

However, as an assembly made up of flawed and fallible human beings, the church also experiences plenty of disagreement and division.

That's the paradox and the tension we have to live with.

One day, I pray that God will heal our divisions, and help us transcend the differences we have. One day we do pray that God's will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven.

But that does bring up an odd question. If Jesus prayed that all of his followers would be one, then why on earth are we marking and commemorating today the 500th Anniversary one of the greatest divisions in Christianity, namely the Protestant Reformation?

Before tackling that question I want to make a few stipulations.

First, there were excesses on both sides during the Reformation. There were intolerant behaviors displayed by both sides that make 21st century Christians cringe.

Second, the Reformation might not have happened at all if a different kind of Pope had been in office. It's always hard to play the game of "what if" when it comes to history. But you can make a strong argument that if there were a Pope like the current Pope Francis in office in 1517, history would have been very different. However, his predecessor from 500 years ago, Pope Leo X was a very different kind of leader. Pope Leo X was part of the powerful Medici family, and he was more interested in power politics than in anything spiritual. Leo was made a cardinal at age 13, not because of any spiritual gifts, but because of his family connections. And in response to the Reformation, Leo X was interested in defending his power, not in making necessary changes in the church. Leo kept doubling down on papal power, and ended up escalating divisions in the early years of the Reformation.

Third, during my lifetime there has been a wonderful movement of ecumenical conversations and theological dialogues that have made remarkable progress. Now, given the fact that we've had a formal division for 500 years, movements towards increasing unity won't happen quickly. But I suspect that within the next century or two, we will find formal ways of experiencing greater Christian unity in the midst of theological diversity, and that divisions from the 16th century will be healed.

Nevertheless, even with all of these stipulations, I would still make two claims:

1. I would claim that the Protestant Reformation is of huge importance historically, for it provided some very necessary corrections to some very dangerous abuses.

And 2., I would also contend that a central message of the Reformation is still vitally important for Christians today.

First—the corrections of abuses. Today it's clear, even amongst modern Roman Catholic historians and theologians that the medieval church had gone off the theological rails in a number of ways. And the Reformation would cause the Roman Catholic church to make corrections and clean up its act in a number of ways. One modern Roman Catholic historian

writes, "There had to be a Reformation, and it is good that the Reformation shook up a status quo in Rome and elsewhere that was unacceptable and untenable."³

After all, Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic monk and priest who had no interest in starting a different theological movement. He simply wanted the church to make some reforms and clean house. Again, if the Pope in 1517 had been Francis I not Leo X, I suspect those in-house reforms would have happened, and there might not have been the need for a separate Protestant division of the church.

But, I have that second claim. I would still say that a central message of the Reformation is of vital spiritual importance for all Christians today.

It's an important theological insight that Martin Luther had. It's something that Protestants might pay lip service to. But it's a deep truth that has not fully sunk into the way that we Christians live our lives. And that truth is this:

It's not about what we do. It's about who God is.

Whether we're talking about the Christian life, or our salvation, or our relationship to God...

It's not about what we do. It's about who God is.

It's not about our actions. It's about God's loving nature, and God's loving actions.

And this is so important in our world today. Because we have enormous pressures on us to be perfect, or at least to seem to be perfect.

There is enormous pressure to succeed. We have to stay constantly busy to justify our existence. We are told to work harder, work longer. In our jobs, in our relationships, in our families, we're supposed to be perfect.

After all, what kinds of things do we post on social media? We are actually pretty selective. We tend to mainly post those things that show us succeeding, or our kids succeeding. We display the happy veneer of us at our best. And we often hide us at our worst.

And what's the result of all this pressure to be perfect? Anxiety. Depression. Substance abuse. Rising suicide rates.

I have often been talking to good faithful Christians approaching the end of their lives. And many of them say, "I'm just not sure I've done enough good things to go to heaven." Or "I'm not sure I've done enough to make God love me."

And I usually tell them something along the lines of, "You're right—you haven't. And for that matter, none of us have. It's not about what we do. It's about who God is, and what God does."

³ Matthew Levering, *Was the Reformation a Mistake?: Why Catholic Doctrine Is Not Unbiblical*

That was Martin Luther's most important theological insight. It was something that was clear in scripture. But that idea got lost and ignored and overlooked over the centuries.

God's love is not about what we ought to do or should do or must try to do. God's love is about God's love.

We pay lip service to words like "unconditional love" and "amazing grace." We might sing them in our hymns. But at some gut level, we still don't embrace them fully.

In 1518 Martin Luther said it this way:
"The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done."⁴

The opening hymn at the 10:30 service was also written by Martin Luther. It was translated from German in more old-fashioned English. But the 2nd verse proclaimed,

"Thou grantest pardon through thy love;
thy grace alone availeth.
Our works could ne'er our guilt remove;
yea, e'en the best life faileth.
For none may boast themselves of aught,
but must confess thy grace hath wrought
whate'er in them is worthy."⁵

Or perhaps in a more contemporary and less poetic English translation:
'God gives us forgiveness through his love
His grace is the only thing that helps us.
What we do can never be enough
Yes, even the very best of us fall short.
For no one can truly brag about anything they do,
But must acknowledge that it is only God's love that does good things through them.'

This is the heart of Luther's Reformation insight. This is something we still need to believe. This is something we still need to embrace. This is the way we must seek to live.

God's love is not about what we ought to do or should do or must try to do.

God's love is about God's love.

⁴ *The Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 26

⁵ Hymn 151, *The Hymnal* 1982