

Catholicity - Four Marks of the Church Series

by Michael Flowers

The church is Catholic because it is a universal and cosmic community, united in baptism, proclaiming a message of transformation and eternal life.

Duration: 26:16

Scripture: Isaiah 61:10, Matthew 6:33, Romans 12:5, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 5:21, Hebrews 4:16, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "Catholicity"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of understanding the supernatural nature of our faith and the role of grace in our lives. He highlights the concept of eternal life and how it resides within us, making us worthy of veneration. The sermon also discusses the universal presence of God and how it works within us to bring light and transformation. The gospel is presented as the solution to the universal problem of sin, offering healing and restoration to all who believe.

Transcript

Abba, Father, we thank you for these readings today, reminding us of your love for us, of the eternal nature of your church, of the reality that in the midst of this time, as your people gather in your name, we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. We have come to Jesus. We have come to the spirits of those made righteous.

And we thank you for the communion of the saints, that death does not separate us any longer, but we are one in the Holy Spirit. Quicken our hearts today, Lord, as we ponder your word. I pray that you draw us closer and closer to that throne of grace where we can receive mercy and grace in our time of need.

Thank you. In the name of Jesus, amen. Let's be seated.

Today, we're going to consider what's called the third mark of the church. There's four of them. One, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church.

And we're going to hang out on the word Catholic today in hopes to clarify what this word means, where it has come from and how we utilize it as Anglicans today. The word Catholic was first used in the second century by St. Ignatius of Antioch, and it was used as an adjective to describe the multiple Christian congregations all professing and practicing the same faith as handed down from the apostles, recognizable from city to city, province to province and continent to continent. Wherever you went, you

could recognize this church.

Even in the second century, each congregation had the same hierarchical structure, bishop, presbyter, deacon, and practiced the same sacraments and believed the same essential doctrines, one body and one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all. He calls this phenomenon the Catholic church, little c, even in the Greek, little c, lowercase, the Catholic church used as an adjective. You can read his letters written around 107.

107 is the year that he died, and that's when he was writing most of these letters on his way to Rome to meet his martyrdom. And so he's going through all of these cities throughout Turkey and on his way to Rome, and he's naming these letters based on the churches that he's speaking to. Around 107 is when he's writing this in the collection called the Apostolic Fathers, those successors of the apostles.

Ignatius, his name means fire bearer, like ignite, right? Ignatius. He was one who ignited the church. Ignatius was the third bishop of Antioch in the Roman province of Syria, and he was a successor of Peter.

So he was that close to Peter, the apostle. Our understanding of Catholic, little c, lowercase, reaches back to St. Ignatius. Western Christians were not called Roman Catholics for the first thousand years, really.

This is why we say that we are Catholic, but not Roman, the Orthodox Church professes the same thing, they see themselves as the one holy Catholic, but not Roman and apostolic church. And so do we. This is why we say we are Catholics, but not Roman.

So what do we make of this word as an adjective? Let's think about this word outside of hierarchical structures and what we might commonly think to mean Catholic. Catholic literally means according to the whole, and it's most commonly described as meaning universal. Unfortunately, we often think of universal as geographical.

Christianity is universal because it's on every continent, it's throughout the world, it's worldwide. But that would be to limit our understanding of what Catholic means. We find people with brown eyes all over the world, right? And yet we don't say brown eyes are Catholic.

So what do we mean if brown eyes are not Catholic? I got blue ones and I know they are. Yeah. What do we mean? Well, it begins with baptism, begins with water baptism.

It begins with the initiation into a new community of redeemed people, the people of God in the ancient church. Those coming for baptism would undress. They would virtually undress and remove any jewelry, any bling, anything that they would be wearing normally throughout their lives.

Before getting into the water, you had to take off anything that could identify you with a certain class, whether that's high or low, so that you're all standing on the same ground when you go into the waters of baptism, slave and free. Right. So off comes the Rolex and the Timex.

Off comes the iPhone XR and the old flip phone, the finest clothing and the shabbiest of slaves. That all comes off. Getting into the water with no identifiable bling leaves you really naked.

I mean, really naked, naked and unashamed, taking us right back to where it all began and ready to become a new creation. I think you're wondering in the back of your mind, are we going to institute such a baptism? In the waters of Christian baptism, every Ivy League degree, all the letters after your name, your

zip code, your nationality, any boundary marker of superiority or inferiority comes off. You are baptized into a new humanity and a new way of being fully human.

So catholicity begins in this understanding of baptism. It's a new beginning and it's beyond universal. It's cosmic because the church is invisible as well as visible.

As I've said before, the megachurches in heaven, what we read about today in Hebrews 12, that's where the megachurches and they're cheering us on. It's that great cloud of witnesses. And so beginning with this understanding of baptism where you're just leveled and you take on a new status and everyone has the same status, sons and daughters of God.

And we have to work on this vision, right? It doesn't happen automatically, and sometimes we resist all of this, but that is the meaning of becoming Christian. Number one, and it's in your bulletin there. The church is Catholic because it is a microcosm of a new universal human society.

New creation, Paul calls it. If anyone be in Christ, new creation, Galatians three, beginning with twenty six, because Paul ties this truth about baptism into this exchange of bling and social status when he says, so in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. Not some of you, but all of you are all God's children through faith for all.

Get this inclusive language here. And all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed. Here's the new clothes.

So you go in naked and you come up clothed with new clothes. That's what being a Christian is. Being clothed with Christ, exchanging your filthy rags, as Isaiah says, right for Jesus and his radiance, there is neither Jew nor Gentile nationality, neither slave nor free social status, nor is there male and female where this battle of the sexes should not exist in the kingdom of God, because we're all of the same status, not dominating it over the other person, but submitting one to another, as Paul says in the For you are all inclusive again.

You are all one in Christ Jesus. Oh, church, take this in. This is so basic, but it's so often not grasped and walked out.

We have to get it from here. Going through your ears right now, again, you're hearing again, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, you have to get rid of the cynicism that over the years that we hear sermons with, right, we're thinking about other things and we're not letting that truth penetrate us and change us right here and right now in the preaching of this word, it's not my word, it's God's word. And I'm just one of those servants that gets to proclaim it to you today and you have that same calling to go out and proclaim it everywhere you go.

Right. Right. All right.

That's why we're an apostolic church. You're an apostolic people. We'll deal with that next week.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free. There is neither male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus, and if you belong to Christ, that's what we all want.

We want not only to read about belonging, but we want to feel belonging. You feel like you belong to Christ. It begins here in the body of Christ.

You see, it's skin to skin, face to face, eyelash to eyelash relationships developing. That's how we belong in that sense of that visceral belonging. It's a theological reality, but we want to put flesh on this.

If you belong to Christ, then you plural, all of you are Abraham's seed and heirs, according to the promise, which is the reception of the Holy Spirit. So we're reaching all the way back to Abraham in this communion of the saints, Moses and Elijah appearing on the Mount of Transfiguration, talking to Jesus about his exodus. It's not that's the Old Testament and this is the New Testament.

No, there's there's this new covenant, which is the fulfillment of the old. It's the fulfillment. And we're a part of that fulfillment.

And so in the waters of Christian baptism, slaves, women and children, to name a few lesser than in that society, in Roman society. In the waters of Christian baptism, slaves, women and children, three groups were baptized into the same water as the rich and the privileged. It was the same water, folks.

It wasn't like over here, the poor get baptized in this water and over here, the rich get baptized. No, because they all go in discarded with all of the blame that they could bring in. You leave that behind and you go into the same waters.

Yeah, this hits me deeply because I was raised in the South and I remember colored fountains and fountains over here where white folks would drink. That stuff doesn't die very easily. So we have to remember when we think about, yeah, I want to fight racism, I want to fight sexism, I want to fight all of these isms.

It begins in the water of baptism. It begins right there, seeing yourself identified with the new humanity. Amen.

Confessing the same faith made new in Christ, his sons and daughters of the father, those slaves, those women, those children and all the rest. Whatever defined us before is relativized by the new defining mark of catholicity. There is the word.

That's what we're trying to get a hold of this morning, catholicity, receiving the spirit of adoption. This eternal presence in all places, not localized into one nation, one building, one people, but the omnipresent, omnipotent power and presence of the Holy Spirit poured out upon all flesh. That's catholicity.

That's universal and that's cosmic, amen. That's a little bit about what we're identifying with. The boundaries of the church are as wide as humanity in this catholicity.

The boundaries of the church are as wide as humanity. Point to the church is Catholic because it proclaims a Catholic, a universal message. The message of Jesus is not addressed to any particular nation or group.

The gospel is addressed to every conceivable human being. It's for prostitutes and pimps, it's for high culture and for hillbillies. You got one preaching here for Democrats and Republicans, communists and neo-Nazis.

The message of Christ comes to everyone saying, repent, the kingdom of God is here. It's for Johnson County and Jackson County. It's for east of Troost and it's for the west of Troost.

You know, no one's left out and we have to work hard to make sure that's a reality in our church, right? No one is left out. This is catholicity, young and old, rich and poor, it's for every nation, tribe and tongue. It looks like the throne of God in Revelation.

That's catholicity, the gospel is a universal Catholic message because when the gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit turns the lights on at the preaching of the gospel. It's not just mere words. This is why preaching is sacramental, because the Holy Spirit accompanies us in the hearing and in the proclamation.

He's working on me as I'm trying to proclaim this to you in the foolishness of preaching. Paul calls it that. And then he's working on you as it's going into your heart.

And it's through that, it's through this universal presence, this omnipresence of God here in this building this morning saying, hello, come to turn the lights on inside of you. In thy light, we see light. But also the gospel is amazingly translatable.

The other two monotheistic religions, at least the biggies, Judaism and Islam, place a high premium on preserving the message, the text itself in its original language. And so if you want to really understand Islam properly, you need to learn Arabic. You can buy an English translation of the Koran.

But it's only considered an interpretation. In order to be reading the real Koran, you have to know Arabic and read it in the original language. That's not Catholic.

Right from the beginning, the Christian message was able to translate into the language of the culture. And it begins with the four gospels. Jesus did not speak Greek.

He spoke Aramaic. And so right in the transmission of what Jesus said and how we get it in the four gospels in Koine Greek, there's a translatability going on. And it's continued throughout the world to do this.

This is why to to calcify like masses and liturgies in some other language that's not universal to that particular nation, to that particular people, is to put a barrier up again where you have to learn Latin or you have to learn Greek to go to a Greek Orthodox church or you have to learn Russian to go to a Russian Orthodox church. The gospel is adaptable in any language. Three.

The church is Catholic because the gospel addresses the universal human condition. Friends, because God became a human being, the creator of it all, he moved into our neighborhood and he was tempted in every way conceivable to man. It's what the scripture says.

He's able to sympathize then he's able to suffer with. That's what that word *sympathia* sympathize means. He's able to suffer with our weaknesses and every weakness known and felt by us all.

Therefore, the gospel goes to the root of human illness, illness, and it's universal. It deals with sin. That's the word.

It deals with sin, the universal disease. The gospel solves the human problem that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The gospel is the solution to that.

We are ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven to live in restored communion with God. And so the gospel is universally transformational. It heals everything it touches, like Jesus touching the leper.

It's come to heal everything it touches because Christ is touching you through those words and bringing healing to your human condition. And this is how it addresses our deepest longings. Our quest for belonging and meaning in life's twist and turns, and there's a lot of them ups and downs, disappointments and praise reports.

This is how the gospel does this. It's got that kind of power and most radical of all, number four, the church is Catholic because it bridges the greatest universal barrier of all, death. In his excellent little book on the Apostles Creed, Ben Myers points out the greatest human barrier that divides human beings from one another is not culture or language or class.

The greatest barrier is death. We believe in the resurrection of the body. Life's ultimate end was directed towards death, sin came through Adam into the world and this disease of mortality began to work through the earth and creation.

In Christ and his resurrection, life's ultimate end is moving back towards eternal life. That's why we say that the liturgical calendar and everything we're doing today, proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection and soon return, we say that we are sanctifying time, as it were, because we're claiming that death has no power, no reign over us, that death is a doorway that we walk through into eternal life. He who eats of this bread, Jesus says, shall never die.

That's our proclamation, I'm sticking with it. Jesus stepped across this inevitable barrier and restored communion between the living and the dead. The Feast of All Saints, which we celebrated this past Thursday, is a witness to that communion of the saints absent from the body, present with the Lord, says Paul.

This is our hope. And so the church is Catholic because Jesus has formed one family that stretches out not only across space, but across time. The church includes not only those who are now living, but also all believers who have ever lived.

The church is both visible and invisible. And as we come to identify ourselves with this universal cosmic reality. One holy, Catholic and apostolic church ponder these four points of Catholicity, why? Because as you take these in, it will increase your confidence in sharing the gospel as you take these four items of Catholicity in.

It will build a foundation of confidence where people do not understand what we're doing. We constantly have to explain what we're doing and why we're doing it, because they're living in a postmodern world and nature and grace has been separated and everything that we're doing relies on grace and the coming of the Holy Spirit to make this sacramental this morning. We live in a supernatural world.

We have a supernatural faith. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the giver of life now. He's the giver of life now to know Christ is eternal life in that same chapter this morning in John 17 to know Christ is eternal life.

Why? Because eternal life resides inside of us. And that makes it Catholic. That makes it universal.

That makes it cosmic. Do you realize who you are this morning? Is that a little creepy? You're a supernatural being. Worthy of veneration.

Worthy of veneration, C.S. Lewis says, if you could only look at your neighbor and realize what is sitting beside you, you would be tempted to get on your knees and worship the other person. Because of the transfiguration of Christ, that's where we're all going. It's only glorification that we're talking about in that we're not talking about worshipping one another, we're talking about honoring one another.

That's what veneration means. But we Westerners don't do this very well. We don't like humbling ourselves.

We don't like these acts of weakness. But this is Christianity. And the more that we can get on with venerating one another.

Oh, church, an explosion will take place. And I would say that we do a pretty good job of this and let's continue to honor one another, right, to love and honor one another. So this morning, what are some of the barriers that may be still standing in the way of you being in this stream of Catholicity? Are there any barriers? Is it your zip code? Is it the letters behind your name? Is it your accolades that still set up this like, I don't know if I can hang out with these folks, you know what I'm saying? I don't know if I want to go across that street.

Think about those things this morning, what makes you fully Catholic and bring them here, bring them to the altar. We have altar calls every Sunday. You know that we do altar calls every Sunday and it is come to Jesus.

Amen. We come to Jesus. Oh, man, as we greet one another, we come to Jesus as we come finally to the Eucharist.

We come to Jesus right now in his word because. He's not bounded by space and time. This is the church.

This is the church that I would give my life to. I couldn't give it for anything less, anything less than this. And there's so much more.

There's so much more. So I just bless you today to be one holy Catholic apostolic church in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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