

# “The Dream Church”

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard

Text: The Apostles Creed Series - The Holy Catholic Church

Scripture: John 17:20-26 - Jesus prays for the church, that it would be holy and that it would be unified.

Acts 4:32-35 – the church cares for one another

given at Christian Community Presbyterian Church on

March 12, 2006

<http://ccpc.bowiemd.org/sermons.htm>

To profess belief in the Holy Catholic Church was without controversy when it appeared in the early Christian Creeds in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, early followers of Christ resided in independent congregations united only by a strong experiential faith in Jesus Christ. The word catholic meant “**universal**” and reflected an emerging institutional church that had expanded beyond Palestine. This emerging structure started to make some important decisions. First, they defined what collection of New Testament books were recognized as authoritative. Secondly, bishops began to consolidate power and to **define orthodoxy**. Soon thereafter, the bishops not only defined faith, they shut out of communion all who did not accept its creeds or obey its officers.

By the end of the first century, the church in Rome became prominent. There were several reasons for this. First, Rome was the city in which Paul and Peter died. The letter to the Romans was the most noteworthy of Paul's 13 letters which made their way into the New Testament . . . The Roman church had survived the most notorious persecution under Nero. This vigorous and battle hardened church was also located in the capital of the Empire.

After the Protestant Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century the concept of a universal church took on a **new meaning**. No longer were all Christians controlled by the Bishop in Rome. No longer did the Pope (a) control all clergy and dictate the content upon which they preached, (b) determine who could serve and receive communion, and (c) what language the Bible could be translated into.

After the Reformation the universal church became more “**decentralized**.” This decentralized church has thrived for 500 years and today the Christian church is indeed **universal** in that its presence is felt around the world. Today there are more believers living south of the equator than north. Soon it is believed that China will have more Christians than the United States.

Thankfully one of the things most American Protestants have repented of is **nasty anti-Catholicism**. Some of you will remember days Catholics were told not to date Protestants and both branches were discouraged from worshiping or even entering a building from the other side of the Protestant/Catholic divide. Yet we still have Roman Catholics who join our church---(50% of our new members are former Roman Catholics) —who feel they are committing **an unpardonable sin** in doing so. I've even noticed when they leave our campus on ominous Sunday morning they peer warily up into the clouds as if a lightning bolts would soon strike them dead.-- I'm wary of lightning bolts . . .

I just finished reading Doris Kearns **Goodwin's book on Abraham Lincoln**.

One thing I learned more about was the root of anti-Catholicism in America. Lincoln's challenge in the election of 1860 was putting together a coalition of **anti-slavery** and **northern industrial voters**. The problem was that the northern Protestants who were anti-slavery were also increasingly anti-immigrant. During the 1830's through 1850's three million immigrants, mostly from Ireland and Germany, poured into the northern section of United States. This largely Roman Catholic influx

descended on a country that was mostly Protestant with strong anti-Catholic sympathies. A rabid political movement calling themselves the “**Know Nothing Party**” fought to delay citizenship, to bar the immigrants from voting, and to keep them out of jobs. Newspaper and pulpits assaulted “popery” and there were bloody anti-Catholic riots in northern cities.

**Lincoln**-, who spent a lifetime fighting prejudice of any kind, was asked by party leaders how to integrate these “**Know Nothings**” into a fledging Republican Party that was dominated by abolitionists. Lincoln wrote this memorable memo.

*“How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that all men are created equal...now all are created equal except for Negroes, and foreigners and Catholics. When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia for instance.”*

Thankfully in recent years the deep division between Catholics and Protestants has diminished, as had many other barriers that separate various Protestant groups. But pockets of this old dogmatism still exist.

I remember that during my first pastorate the World Council of Churches document, “**One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.**” The booklet was designed to help Protestant groups and Catholics discuss the issues that presented barriers to unified witness and common ministry. The sticking point in our group was **open access to communion**. Presbyterian and Methodists practiced open communion but the Roman Catholic Church prohibited non Catholics from receiving communion. The local Catholic priest was **adamantly** against it.

In the dialogue, I asked him why? And I prefaced my question by adding, “Save me the argument that the Pope says so?”

“It was simple,” he said. “Admitting any of you Protestants to the sacrament would break the **uniformity of beliefs** of those receiving it.”

**Well I was more argumentative then . . . I said**, “Father George, are you saying that everyone who takes communion at your church agrees wholeheartedly on all topics of faith? No one is in opposition to the church's position birth control? Everyone accepts the perpetual virginity of Mary? They believe that the communion elements are the literal body and blood of Christ? They also accept that women should be denied the offices in the church? All agree---100 percent?”

**Yes, they do.**

What could I say to that? So I tried a follow up question.

“Father George, from reading the gospels, do you think Jesus' disciples were of one mind on all aspects of faith? After all, Simon was a zealot who advocated the violent overthrow of Rome and Matthew was a tax collector, someone who secured his livelihood as a sanctioned officer of the state. They were of one mind?”

**YES THEY were!**

We read from Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17. This is Jesus' fervent prayer that the disciples be unified and committed to ministry together. His prayer was “**that you would be one!**”

Sadly the church has been **competitive** instead of **cooperative**. Evangelism and Church growth often amounts to nothing more than better marketing of your particular church in an effort to **steal away** other churches' members with slicker worship or more effective programming. We used to call it the **“circulation of the saints.”**

My colleague who ran the evangelism committee used to tell us, “Remember, if we filled every sanctuary in every church in the county twice on Sunday morning, there would still be more than enough people to evangelize without stealing each others' sheep.”

**Thankfully there has been good news in following Jesus' call to be unified and holy. A good example is the** Stephen Ministry, which is getting started at CCPC. Anita and Margaret attended a workshop in Florida and they were amazed that the group of 500 people acted as one. 100 plus denominations were represented. All are starting and sustaining ministries of Christ's love.

They accept together that **“Christ is the cure giver, we are the care givers.”** Yes, there is much to celebrate as we attempt to be a “holy catholic church.”

You are aware that one familiar metaphor of the church is the body. Christ is the head of the church and we are the body. Each part is called to share their gifts towards the work of founder—Jesus Christ.

**Not so well known is the most frequent metaphor that Jesus gave for the church. The church is a Boat.**

The church is a vessel afloat on often-stormy seas. Jesus once walked upon the water. When Peter came out to get him he (Peter) floundered. Jesus picked him up and placed him back on the boat..

Another time Jesus was sleeping on a stormy ship crossing the sea of Galilee. The panicked disciples awakened him and he calmed the seas. The church is a boat afloat on the sea—which is the world. Sometimes the sea is calm; other times the storms are raging.

**As a high school senior I** worked at a golf driving range. It was an easy job with side benefits. You could hit 200 golf balls free and sample every model of golf club possible. You also got occasional free lessons from a great teaching pro and occasionally free outings at exclusive country clubs in the Portland area.

When we closed the place each night we had some jobs to perform. One task was picking up the golf balls. We had a little tractor, with a cage on top to protect the rider from people who would try to hit the worker collecting the ball. It had long arms to pick the golf balls up. Once a week---we would walk along the fence line and on the other side of the fence to collect the stray shots. We didn't pick them up—we just tossed them back into the middle where tractor would pick them up.

**This experience, along with the boat metaphor, has informed my pastoral work. Like the fence line, the pastor and the Deacons should be concerned with “working the outsides in.”** We are to connect the saints to share their story of what God has done and what God is now doing and hope that God will continue to work his grace in the future. **Deacons** are called to minister to the **hurting, the grieving, the sick** and others in time of need - essentially providing care so they can get them back aboard the life saving and sustaining vessel of Christ's love—the church.

I entered the pastoral ministry because **I believed in the power of the local church to transform lives.** My Dad was a great pastor---a welcoming figure, who like Lincoln truly had “malice towards none.” But the other person responsible for my belief in the **power of church was my mother.** My older sister was away at college. Beth, a classmate, had dropped out of college and was estranged

from her parents, so she moved in with us. Beth was angry and unhappy and stayed out late. But the rule in our house was that on Sunday morning---if you were alive---you walked down the hill and went to worship.

Beth complained but was not bold enough to challenge my Mother who was giving her free room and board. So she went and started to get her life in order. The next fall, instead of going back to college, she took off for Europe.

We lost track of Beth until a Christmas note arrived stating that she was working in Amsterdam at a Christian Youth Hostel. She loved it. It was changing lives, including her own.

A few years later I found myself in Europe at the end of my semester abroad. Since I was flying out of Amsterdam I decided to stay at the hostel where Beth was working.

We had breakfast together –and she told me how the **summer at our house** was so important to her life. “I hated your mother for making me go to **church**. I had never had an experience with church before. “I thought she was overly critical of what I now consider destructive habits,” she said. “But the worship and the YAD Bible study group allowed me to **meet Jesus** and see how he can change lives. I became infected by the **joy and hope I witnessed in the** people at the church.”

When I came here to Amsterdam I felt warmly welcomed by the staff here. We do some great ministry to the many drug users who find their way to this hostel. This is like an urban church. We are the body of Christ. Being a follower of Christ is a wonderful thing. Your Mom was the catalyst that changed my life around.

**We also heard a short account of the early church in the book of Acts. The Acts accounts are dramatic. The church is growing by leaps and bounds.** The disciples are out daily destroying demons and raising the dead. It is a **dreamlike church**. “*They shared everything in common and more were added to their number everyday.*”

It seems like very little today reminds us of those heady days right after Pentecost. There are moments. Those around when Levitt Bowie opened and 15 homes a day had closings and Dewey Dodds met the moving trucks and CCPC was the only Protestant church in town. The growth and vitality echoed the Dreamlike **Days of Acts**.

At an annual summer gathering of **pastors at the Ministry Conference at Princeton** we always have a lecture on a book of the Bible and then discuss it in small groups. One year the study was Acts. Inevitably the group discussion turned to the state of the church in America. The common complaints were familiar. We lamented the struggles with materialism and individualism. We bemoaned the ---breakdown in authority and the lack of our congregants' knowledge of the Bible. We also shared our concerns about the growing sense that one can be, “**spiritual and not religious.**” **People seem to believe that beliefs and practices in the church are like a--smorgasbord.** You can go along and pick out what you like and leave the rest behind. Worse yet is the increasing number of Americans who believe in Jesus but never darken the door of a CHURCH.

Someone wondered out loud, “If Luke were writing Acts today, what would be written about the pastors' churches during the current years?”

He was interrupted by a pastor who just moved to a church in the hills of Tennessee.

“Gee, this reminds me of **Eleanor Reynolds.**”

“Who is Eleanor Reynolds?” was the reply.

“She is this old women in my congregation back home who is our church historian. You ought to read the little booklet she produced for our church centennial. You cannot believe the things she says; I mean she tells about an **ordinary family night supper** and she makes it sound like it's the **Messianic banquet.**”

Most churches' oral histories are probably a lot like the early stories in Acts . . . dramatic, sometimes conflicted, and confused. But the churches and their members **all share one things in common**—they love the church. And they are united by the **“capacity to see.”** The capacity to see amid the ragged fortunes and foibles of real and struggling congregations **the blessed community of Jesus Christ shining** through.

We will vote today to **sell the property of the rancher we own next door.** When CCPC finished our facilities and no longer had needed the house next door, some members of this congregation worked together and sought ways to meet needs of senior adults. It is a wonderful story of the local church-meeting the unmet needs of city of Bowie and surrounding community. Many of you volunteered, driving seniors around or leading programs. These visionaries had the **“Capacity to See” amid the struggles** of those years, the blessed spirit of Jesus Christ shining through.

**About 10 years ago Heidi Neumark assumed the pastorate at a Lutheran church in the South Bronx,** in perhaps the poorest of all poor neighborhoods in America. On her first Sunday she learned **what kind of church** it was when she found **under the altar a box of rat poison** next to the communion wafers. The leaders and officers include former addicts and unemployed and the recently homeless. It is the **kind of call** the apostle Paul must have meant when he said, *“consider your call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many of you were powerful, not many of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.”*

During Holy Week a certain congregation decided to reenact a Passion play presenting the whole sweep of Holy Week from Palm Sunday to Easter. They also decided to **take it to the streets.** They began by dramatizing Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem by borrowing a donkey and getting an actor to play Jesus. They paraded in a long procession around the block of shabby storefronts and run down apartments shouting, “Hosanna!”

When they got around the block and back to the church, the Palm Sunday procession encountered a **street protest underway** about police brutality. It was fitting really. Jesus and the protesters, the congregation and the street crowds, the cries of Hosanna and the cries of social outrage.

Someone passing by, seeing the confusion and fearing trouble, even called the police, whose arrival brought an added color of drama.

Somehow the procession managed to make it inside the church where the rest of the drama unfolded. **JUST AS THEY HAD HOPED—CURIOUS ONLOOKERS –PROTESTORS, STREET PEOPLE, GANG MEMBERS CAME INSIDE TO WATCH THE DRAMA UNFOLD.**

Jesus was tried, condemned and executed. But then the women went to the tomb and found it empty and discovered the astounding news. He is risen. The actors played their parts well.

The script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and bear witness to the truth of the resurrection. They were each expected to start their testimonies with, **“I know Jesus is alive...”**

**Angie was first.** “I know he is alive because he is alive in me.” She told of abuse by her father, how she fell into despair and then alcoholism, became HIV positive. But she reported how welcomed she felt by the church, then she started attending worship, then a Bible study, and bit by bit she rose from the grave of her life. Now a seminary student, she was studying to be a pastor. “I am alive now because Jesus lives in me.”

The two other witnesses stood in turn, each reciting part of the script, “I know I am alive because . . . Then they were done, and it was time to move on . . . but others in the sanctuary began to rise spontaneously, **“I know that he is alive, because he is alive in me.”**

Homeless people, addicts now clean, the least and the lost stood one by one. Nothing could stop them. “I know that he is alive. It was like a dream—like a dream of a land where every tear is dried and death and pain are no more. A blessed place of community where awe and blessing and joy and generosity and praise are our daily bread.

THAT is what the early leaders meant when they included, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.”

**You and I are blessed. We are riders on the great ship Jesus.**

We are the holy and universal church.

We minister together and are sustained by its worship and service and fellowship.

When we are **facing stormy moments in life**--the brothers and sisters minister to us.

When we stray from the safety of the boat—the spirit of Jesus—embodied by John or Paul, Gary or Deborah, Sarah or Rebecca, search us out and toss us back into the boat.

And safely back on board we are reminded that with Jesus—all is OKAY.

THAT’S WHY I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.