

The Holy Catholic Church

From the series: I Do Believe

Text: Mark 11:28; Ephesians 4:4

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Today we celebrated the sacrament of Baptism in the name of the Triune God:

The Father - God as ground and source of all that is;

Jesus Christ - the human face of God in which we have seen love and grace;

The Spirit - the operative presence of the Living God here and now, with us.

Baptized in the name of the Living God - signed by water as belonging to the people of God, the community of the Covenant of Grace.

There is no mention of the Reformed Church in America, no mention of Christ Community Church. No, Baptism is the sacrament of belonging to the People of God, not an institution nor any organizational arrangement of those people.

Baptized in the name of the Living God - not in the name of the servant of Word and sacrament - not in my name. The Church is not a personality cult. The celebrant is but a servant of God, of God's Word of grace, of the signs and seals of grace.

This morning's baptisms give me occasion to say that but, had there been no sacrament this morning, I would have made this point in any case, because today this congregation will gather, not only in this setting of worship, but also, later, in its organizational form as a congregation. And this is as critical a moment as this congregation has faced in its 126 years, for it will have to decide who it is and what it will be.

On the threshold of that decision, I want to be very clear: what is at stake is our sense of what shape God's grace takes in this world. What is at stake is our understanding of the Gospel of God's grace, the interpretation of the scriptures and the translation of the Gospel in our historical context so that it makes a connection between the revelation of God and present human experience.

At issue is our understanding of how our present human situation is addressed by the Word of the Living God. In making that point, I am challenging two possible bases for how you might decide to cast your vote -

First of all, you ought not to vote No because you attribute too much importance to the Reformed Church in America, as though the RCA is synonymous with the Holy Catholic Church. The RCA is an organization, a human structure. To say that is not to denigrate the RCA; it is simply to recognize that denominations are human organizational structures and, to be honest, they are more a witness to the sinfulness of the Church than to the spirituality of the Church. Most of them have ethnic roots or they have arisen out of doctrinal conflict. The proliferation that resulted from the rending of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century has been a tragic witness to human cussedness. Yet, the Spirit works in and through them nonetheless.

There are affectional family ties and long-time relationships that draw one. I recognize that and I do not belittle that. But, acknowledging that, I must say that what is at stake today transcends those human, positive, emotional bonds.

Secondly, you ought not to vote Yes simply to support me, your pastor. The Church of Jesus Christ is not a personality cult. You must not vote on the basis of a human leader.

Let me be clear; the literally hundreds of letters, cards, and phone calls, your personal words of love and support, have moved me greatly and touched me deeply. Without that strong sense of your affection and affirmation I do not know how I could have gotten through these past months.

Your decision today, however, must not be to follow a human leader. Your decision must be based on your understanding of the grace of God and the concrete form of that grace in human community.

In the negotiation meetings between the Classis of Muskegon and our negotiating team, there was, I believe, a defining moment. I was not present; I have not been a part of that process; it is not my place. But I was told that, at the second meeting, one of our people made a statement that put the issue in its true perspective. The person was John Van Eenenaam. John and Marianne and family have been with us for twenty-five years. Before that, they were in Reformed congregations - in fact, their baptisms occurred in these respective Reformed congregations. And John's name - is there a more difficult Dutch name to master, either in its spelling or its pronunciation? Further, John stems from Zeeland! Those are true Dutch Reformed roots, or should I say, bulbs!

John said to the Classis people, "If something happened to Dick Rhem, we would look for someone to replace him who is like him, who would lead us into the realization of our Mission Statement."

When I heard that, my heart leaped. That made it clear to all who had ears to hear that what is at issue here is not Dick Rhem. Rather, what is at issue is that message that I have proclaimed and the incarnation of that message in this concrete community.

Not the Reformed Church as an organization; not Dick Rhem as a human leader; rather, the *message* that has shaped us and formed us as the community that we are.

Having said that, I do not deny that Spirit needs form and the Church will always take on some concrete form. And the Spirit does call, anoint, and equip human leaders. The organized churches and the human leaders - that is all we have, warts and all. But, we must never confuse a form of organization nor a human leader with the thing in itself - the Holy Catholic Church which is the People of God living in covenant with the God of all mercy.

I do believe the Holy Catholic Church. That is, that God's Spirit gathers a community of persons who experience God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. In all of its ups and downs, its finest moments and its terrible betrayals, there is an ongoing community of people indwelt by God's Spirit, forgiven by God's grace and called to worship and to witness to the God Who is Creator of all and Lover of all, Whose Spirit is moving all things toward the consummation of God's eternal purposes.

In the history of that people there have been critical junctures. Certainly we believe such was the case when the Word became flesh. In the traditional role of prophet, Jesus called the People of God to be faithful to their own tradition. That meant radical revision, repentance and renewal and that does not happen without sharp resistance.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus comes but once to Jerusalem. He will take his message of the Kingdom to the religious center of the nation, there to challenge the religious authorities with his call to renewal. His radical action in the temple, driving out the moneychangers as our text has it, was a symbolic prophetic action that called in question the whole Temple system which Marcus Borg describes as "The politics of holiness" in contrast to that quite different understanding of Jesus which Borg calls "The politics of compassion."

I read this Gospel lesson, however, not to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' action, but rather to show how such prophetic action raises the question of authority.

And they said, 'By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?' (Mark 11:28)

Here we meet the same two factors to which I referred earlier - the organizational structure and the human leaders.

The organizational structure is the form the Spirit takes in concrete human society - political structures, economic structures, religious structures.

Over and over again in the respective arenas of human culture, movements are born and gather momentum and experience dynamic growth. Then they level off; they seek a form by which the movement's insights or policy or beliefs can be perpetuated and regularized. Usually the movement begins with the vision of a person or small group but, once the vision becomes institutionalized, caretakers take over - guardians of the system.

And then the originating vision is lost in the routine of the system and the caretakers try to find ways to keep the institution going and even try to convince themselves and the people that there is still fire burning somewhere.

Enter the prophetic voice uncovering the hollowness of the institutional forms and calling for re-visioning and renewal. But that is threatening to the caretakers; they have a vested interest in maintaining the forms and structures in place. And so, they take on the visionary.

The question is quite in order - By what authority?

And that is where the battle rages again and again in all dimensions of human society: the organizational personnel charged to keep the institution alive and growing and the prophetic visionary who sees the tradition has hardened and lost its connection to human experience as that continues to develop, and calls for revision and renewal.

The organizational people have a responsibility to preserve and perpetuate institutional forms; the prophetic visionary loves that which the forms were created to embody and pass along - the original fire, the burning truth which gets domesticated and calcified with the movement of time, and thus he challenges the forms in order to set free the Spirit.

The Temple authorities ask, *"Who gives you authority to do these things?"*

It is the classic clash of institutional form and visionary prophetic challenge and the question is: By what authority?

Jesus responded by putting a question to his interrogators:

"John's baptism; was it from God or of human origin?"

You see, Jesus was not the first to be challenged for making a prophetic protest. John the Baptist had preached fire and judgment on the banks of the Jordan and Jerusalem had streamed out to hear him. There was a Baptist movement parallel to Jesus' early movement. So, Jesus put the question of authority back in the lap of the religious leaders because the question was the same, but it took the focus

off Jesus and put it on John and that created a quandary for the Temple authorities because, if they said John's message was from God, Jesus would ask, "Why then did you not believe his message?," but if they said John's message was of human origin, they feared the people because the people had felt the power of God in John's prophetic preaching.

Human society in all aspects of its culture must again and again decide between the established structure and organization and the prophetic voice challenging and calling to new vision. It is seldom simple, never black and white. But the human story is one of Spirit finding form, form conveying Spirit, form growing rigid, imprisoning Spirit and Spirit breaking the form to find new freedom - in the arena of politics, of education, of religion. And the people have to choose - the organizational form or the new vision created by a human leader.

The choice should not be made because one absolutizes an institution, nor because one idolizes a person. I do believe the Holy Catholic Church. I do not believe *in* the Church; I believe the Church - that is, that reality of a gathered people of God called by the Spirit, embraced by grace to worship and to serve the Living God.

Over the centuries it has had many forms and experienced many prophetic challenges. It has been terribly corrupt and marvelously renewed. And the people must choose - they ask, "By what authority?"

The answer lies in another question - Is this of God, or of human origin?

Let me put the question to the Muskegon Classis - Is God's grace evident here in the lives of people transformed, of people touched by grace, healed and experiencing new life? Is there evidence here of worship full of wonder, of devotion to God expressed through commitment to people and compassionate care one of another? Are children nurtured in God's love and youth challenged to follow the way of Jesus?

If the answer is Yes, then is this of God or of human origin? If of God, then, I ask, why are we being troubled?

If the answer is of human origin, then they must answer to you - as fine and beautiful a community of people as one is likely to find anywhere.

I rest my case with you, my people. If what I see in you is not an authentic expression of God's grace effecting human transformation, then I've got it all wrong. But if an honest examination of this community does bear out that this is a community of God's people, then I have nothing more to say.

They ask me, "By what authority?" or "Is your theology right?", or however the question is phrased.

I respond, "Is this Christ Community of God or of human origin? You tell me."

I believe the Holy Catholic Church - not *in*, rather, I believe the Church; I believe God will have as God has had, a people, transformed by Grace, constituting a concrete community of compassion.

Always, at all times, in all places. I do believe that. I do believe the Church is here in this place. I believe the Church here is and will be:

catholic - that is, really one, universal;

evangelical - that is, a community of Good News, of Grace;

reformed - that is, being always in process, always reforming.

I do believe - the Holy Catholic Church, and I believe it comes to concrete expression here. We are the Church!