I had a hard time sitting still in church when I was small. I was fidgety and squirmy, or so I am told. Some of you can relate to what I am saying.

An enterprising mother of three young children from Texas has created a phone app to her iPhone called Big Church Bingo to help her children pay attention in church. To play the game, a grid of words that might be heard in a typical worship service appears on the screen. When children hear a word in worship that appears on the grid, they simply tap the screen and the icon darkens. Five darkened icons in a row achieve bingo. But unlike real bingo, you’re not supposed to shout out “bingo” while I’m preaching. One point is awarded for each bingo, and the game keeps track of total points earned, if parents want to institute a reward system for paying attention.

I’m still restless in church; institutionally restless, you might say. I’m restless for us to become the kind of community Jesus envisions for his church. I long for us to become fully devoted disciples of Jesus.

We come today to the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” I doubt many people today refer to the church with the descriptive words “holy” and “catholic.” I hear another adjective associated with church—institutional. People talk a great deal about institutional church. When people talk this way, typically they aren’t being complimentary.

Institutional church has come to be associated with a bundle of constitutions and bylaws, policies and procedures, programs and committees.

The caricature of the Saturday Night Live “church lady” may be a window into how the wider church sees church people. She is a spoof on our joyless, crabby selves.

One of the most watched YouTube videos this year, “Why I hate religion but love Jesus,” has attracted 20 million viewers since its debut four months ago. The video features Jefferson Bethke, a 20-something, church-going Christian, who begins his YouTube with the words, “What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion.” Later in the video, he claims that Jesus hated religion. He has some witty lines in the video such as “Quit putting on
a false look ’cause there’s a problem if people only know you’re a Christian by your Facebook—It’s like saying you play for the Lakers just because you bought a jersey.”

He never says what he means by religion. In subsequent interviews, he explains that he made the video to highlight the difference between Jesus and false religion. It turns out he doesn’t lambaste all religion—just the fake kind.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was confined to a Nazi prison, he coined the phrase “religion-less Christianity” in a letter to a friend. Bonhoeffer lamented how the rituals of Christian religion had utterly failed to confront the monstrous evil of Nazism, and even cooperated with it.

William Stringfellow picks up this same theme when he writes, “Religion in America…has virtually nothing to do with God and has little to do with people’s practical lives in society. Religion seems, mainly, to have to do with religion.”

Jesus founded a church; make no mistake about it. He instituted his church to promote good and resist evil.

Matthew records that Jesus and his disciples are traveling when Jesus pops the question, “Who do people say that I am?” (16:13). His disciples play back some of the names bandied about. Some speculated that he was John the Baptist or one of the prophets.

Jesus intensifies his question the second time around: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, impetuous Peter, who often gets it wrong, this time nails it. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

“Blessed are you, Simon,” Jesus says, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Jesus deploys a deliberate play of words here since the Greek word he uses for Peter (petros) is the same word for rock (petra) later in the sentence. Simon, your name is now Peter meaning rock and on this rock I will build my church.

There’s a division of the house between Catholics and Protestant over this verse. Catholics interpret Jesus as referring to Peter himself. Jesus is building his church on Peter. That’s why Catholics regard Peter as the first pope. Protestants believe Jesus is building his church on Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah. So, it’s Peter’s confession, not Peter himself, that becomes the foundation for Christ’s church.

The Greek word Jesus uses for church, ecclesia is not religious in nature. It’s a political term. When Aristotle talked about an assembly in Greek democracy, he spoke of it as an ecclesia. Church doesn’t refer to a building or house of worship. Church refers to an assembly of people.

Protestants are often confused by the reference in the
Jesus doesn’t give us the option of belonging to him and dissing his church.

Apostles’ Creed to the word “catholic.” Many of you associate it with the Catholic Church headquartered in Rome. The original meaning of catholic is universal. We are members of Christ’s universal body of believers.

Holy is, likewise, a misunderstood word. Holy has become synonymous with words like self-righteous and sanctimonious. You wouldn’t want to be called “holier-than-thou” or “holy Joe.”

Holy in Scripture refers to something unique or distinct. God is unique and distinct from all created beings. In Revelation, a host of angels sings before the throne of God, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (4:8). No other attribute of God is referenced three times in quick succession. Scripture never refers to God as love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy. God is three times holy. God is in a class all by himself.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

I believe in the...church. Despite its flaws, Jesus instituted the church as his body in the world. Jesus knew full well his church was going to be flawed when he instituted it. After all, it’s made up of deeply flawed people. That’s what you get when you assemble sinners together. I not only serve a congregation of sinners. Worse yet, you have a sinner for a pastor.

I meet people who claim allegiance to Jesus but eschew any relation to the church. Forget the church, they tell me; just give me Jesus. I don’t like organized religion. What are they saying? Do they prefer disorganized religion?

There is a tendency in western society to glorify what is spiritual and invisible and denigrate anything physical and visible. An early church heresy called Gnosticism believed all matter to be evil and the spirit good is still alive and kicking in the church. Jesus doesn’t give us the option of belonging to him and dissing his church. If we claim allegiance to Jesus, we are automatically members of his church.

Now, the fact that the church is a flawed institution doesn’t give us license to act like jerks. Most people don’t leave this or any other church on account of some major doctrinal issue. Most leave because they perceive their fellow congregants to be mean-spirited or petty about God-knows-what. If we are the church of Jesus Christ, he expects us to act accordingly.

I believe in the...catholic or universal church. We are not simply American or White-Anglo Protestant, Presbyterian or Reformed. Jesus’ church is bigger than Vienna Presbyterian; way bigger. We stand in solidarity with the worldwide church, especially those Christians living in many parts of the world who are being oppressed...
for their faith. We stand in solidarity with them. We seek to support persecuted Christians with our prayers, advocacy and financial aid.

I do not aspire to serve a lily white, upper crust church. I seek to serve a church that represents the breadth of people who now live in our community.

I believe in the holy catholic church. Jesus calls his church today to a life of holiness. We aspire by our distinctive, winsome manner of living to offer an alternative to the world’s way of doing things. The Christian church in America is so desperate to fit into the prevailing secular customs that sometimes we jettison our core beliefs and soften our message. In this growing secular age, it will become imperative for Christians to become more intentionally counter-cultural to society’s prevailing beliefs and ethical norms.

We sometimes sing the Gloria Patri as a doxology in worship using the words, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen.” One Sunday after worship, a mom was leaving with her five-year-old daughter. Her daughter sang the last line of the Gloria Patri loud and clear, “World with weird men, Amen, Amen.” She thought the last phrase “world without end” was being sung as “world with weird men.” Holy isn’t weird. Holy means distinct or set apart.

I commend to you a second century letter from an anonymous Christian disciple to a highly regarded pagan named Diognetus: “Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or custom. They don’t live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life…. Yet, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking manner of life…. They marry like everyone else and beget children, but do not cast off their offspring. They share a common table but not their marriage bed. They busy themselves on earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives…. They are poor, yet make many rich. They are insulted, and repay the insult with honor.”

This is not wishful thinking. This is how early Christians actually lived their lives. As we come to this table of Holy Communion, we come as true believers. We are not merely playing church. We want to be the church in the way we love God and treat each other and go about our jobs and love our families.