

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in the Church" (*The Apostles' Creed Series*)  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (Children's sermon was based on Acts 2:42-47)  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: February 17, 2019, at First UMC

## **INTRODUCTION**

After singing about the church, praying for the church, being introduced to the leaders of our church, reading scriptures about the church, and watching some videos about the church, you've probably figured out what the theme of today's worship service is. Thanks to those of you who sent in emails about why you love our church, we'll continue this theme during the offertory and all the way to the end of the worship service. We're focused on this topic because—since the beginning of the year—we've been working our way through the lines of *The Apostles' Creed*, talking about our belief in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Today, I invite you to consider what it means to say, "I believe in the church."

## **1—THE CHURCH IS ONE BODY**

Throughout Christian history, the church has been described with many different metaphors. There are biblical passages that describe the church as the *bride of Christ*, the *flock of sheep* that belongs to the Good Shepherd, or the *living stones* that are built into a spiritual house. In the third century, a theologian named Cyprian wrote that "you cannot have God for your Father unless you have the Church for your *Mother*." It has also been common in Christian tradition to think of the church as *a ship* that carries the believers, just like Jesus saved and comforted the disciples during a storm at sea. In today's scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 12, however, the Apostle Paul wrote about the church as the *body of Christ*.

Using this metaphor, we see first of all that the church is one body. While there are certainly many members and even many congregations, denominations, and major branches of Christian tradition—there is only one Christian church. That's what *The Apostles' Creed* means when it says "I believe . . . in the holy catholic church." The word *catholic* isn't referring to the Roman Catholic Church

that has the Pope as the leader. Rather, the root meaning of the word *catholic* is *universal*. It means that we believe in one church with Christ at its head, a church that has members all around the globe, has existed for two thousand years, and will continue to exist into the foreseeable future.

## **2-THE BODY OF CHRIST HAS MANY MEMBERS**

The second aspect of the church as the body of Christ is that it has many members. These members are not only numerous, but also diverse. They are the eyes and ears and a nose. They are kidneys, intestines, and toes. They are the fingers and tendons and skin. They are the elbows and muscles and chin. Each part of the body has its own role to play, its own function to fulfill, and its own necessity for being. Thus, writes Paul, no part of the body is more or less essential. Every part of the body is important for the proper functioning of the whole.

This essentiality of the body parts is very obvious at the local church level, where we clearly need Sunday school teachers for the children, maintenance folks to care for the building and grounds, musicians to lead worship, and Finance Committee members and staff to help make sure the contributions get taken to the bank and the bills get paid. We need those who visit the sick and welcome the visitors, and we need people who serve refreshments and take out the trash.

This need for all the different body parts is also true in the larger church. Just on Friday afternoon, our office staff and I were working on a project that required us to reach out by phone and email to pastors and staff members at other Utah churches and at the Mountain Sky Conference office in Denver. That same afternoon, I read denominational email that came from United Methodist sources around the United States and from our missionary Mozart Adevu in Ghana. The members of the body of Christ are far and wide, all doing their part to keep our collective ministry going, so that we can continue “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” And that’s just the United Methodist Church. There’s also Ogden Interfaith Association, Utah’s Coalition of Religious Communities, and many, many other ecumenical and interfaith organizations around the globe. We United

Methodists rightfully take a lot of pride in our United Methodist Committee on Relief. But you should know that very often UMCOR works with other organizations to send supplies and relief aid into places where maybe the Presbyterians, the Baptists, or the Mennonites have better networks; and the Latter Day Saints have frequently helped us transport supplies from one place to another. The church is diverse, and all its parts are essential.

That diversity is important in other ways too. In our Adult Sunday School class, we've been studying the subject of Implicit Bias and talking a lot about racism and other forms of discrimination. One of the facts we've learned is that, the more diverse an organization is, the more likely it is to be effective and successful. We've also learned, however, that diversity can be complicated and frequently requires more effort. So, we could acknowledge that the various parts of Christ's body might sometimes find it uncomfortable or strange to be united in one church. But it's when all of us different parts are working together that we are most likely to succeed in carrying out Christ's mission in the world.

### **3—UNITED METHODISTS ARE TESTING THE BODY OF CHRIST**

In our 12.5 million member United Methodist denomination, these values of unity-in-diversity and appreciation-for-the-many-important-parts-of-Christ's-body are being put to the test. On February 23—this next Saturday—United Methodist delegates from around the globe will gather in St. Louis, Missouri, for a four-day General Conference, specially-called to deal with the role of LGBTQ persons in the life and ministry of our church. The bishops will take turns presiding over the meeting, but will not be able to speak on the floor or vote. Of the 864 delegates who are allowed to speak, make motions, and vote—half will be laypersons, and half will be clergy. If our Mountain Sky Conference delegation is any indicator, the vast majority will be men—which is odd in a denomination that has far more female members. More than half—504 of—the delegates will come from the United States, 260 from Africa, 50 from the Philippines, 40 from Eurasia, and 10 delegates will come from other kinds of Methodist groups.

The discussions will be simultaneously translated into Korean, French, Portuguese, Swahili, Spanish, Russian, and English—and maybe more—so that all can participate.

Right now, no one knows how this is going to turn out. Historically, our denomination has voted repeatedly to keep traditional perspectives on LGBTQ matters, so that may happen again. The African voting block is large, as is the delegation from the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United States. Both those areas tend to vote conservatively. But there is also much conviction and Christian love on the side of opening our hearts and minds and doors to LGBTQ persons. There are groups on both sides that think our United Methodist Church would be better off divided. And, if that's what happens, the splinter groups that might result would still be considered part of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition and certainly would continue to be members of the universal body of Christ. I'm guessing, however, that most United Methodists are hoping and praying that such division doesn't occur, that unity will prevail, and that somehow we can lovingly respect and value each other's differences and still hold together in one body.

We've got a bumpy road ahead of us in the next couple weeks. So, I invite you today to join me in praying for our church. Let's commit to pray for our Mountain Sky delegates, whose names are listed in the bulletin insert. Let's commit to pray for our Bishop Karen Oliveto, who carries not only the weight and worry for the whole church—like all the bishops do—but will also be affected very personally by the outcome. Let's commit to pray for *all* LGBTQ persons inside and outside our congregations who are watching this closely to see if our church will affirm their worth and God-given gifts or deny them yet again. Let's commit to pray for our fellow United Methodists all around the world who may or may not agree with our perspectives. Let's commit to pray for our own local First United Methodist Church here in Marriott-Slaterville, that we may continue to love and support each other as this unfolds, and that our church, big and small, global and local, may continue to be the hands and feet of Christ in our community and the world.

## CONCLUSION

The church is not a perfect institution. On-going and recent news about the Roman Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> and this week's news about 700 sexual abuse cases in the Southern Baptist Convention<sup>1</sup> makes our United Methodist stress seem very small compared to what some other denominations are going through. Unfortunately, though, these collective conflicts, scandals, and violations of sacred trust have turned many people away from the church. For many, who previously grew up in the church and participated deeply in its ministries, it may now seem impossible to say, "I believe in the church." Maybe they can still say, "I believe in God" and "I believe in Jesus and the Holy Spirit," but the church itself has caused too much pain.

We who still love and participate in the church must hear that pain and acknowledge it. We must do our best to change what is wrong, so we can offer healing and hope in a safe and welcoming environment. I like a line in our *United Methodist Book of Discipline* that says, "We share with many Christian communions a recognition of the . . . sober realization that the church is in need of continual reformation and renewal."<sup>2</sup> In other words, this body regularly needs a fresh infusion of God's creative and life-giving Holy Spirit.

The church is Christ's body incarnate in the world today, warts and wrinkles and all. But hopefully, this body of Christ can also be adapting and changing and improving too, so that its life can continue. I love my church and I want to be a part of this one body of Christ with many important members, all necessary for the functioning of the whole. With this as our defining value, I hope you can join me in affirming, "I believe in the church."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/05/world/europe/pope-nuns-sexual-abuse.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Awful-awful-trauma-Southern-Baptist-13621251.php>

<sup>3</sup> The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 2016, p. 50.