

“Marks of the Church: ONE **HOLY** CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC” by Rev. Dr. Peter Thompson

Colossians 1:15-20

Philippians 2:5-11

*Pastor Barber, a good preacher but with no sense of humor, was preaching on John the Baptist one Sunday. He suddenly declared, "Then Jordan baptized Jesus in the John!" He kept going, unaware of what he'd just said. The whole congregation just sat there, stone-faced. Their failure to react was funnier than the pastor's blooper. "Didn't they just hear what Pastor Barber said?" About a year later, Pastor Barber was preaching on David and suddenly Pastor Barber exclaimed, "And there David stood by the gate of the sanctuary, breathless and pantless." A young man quietly giggled, but yet again everyone else just sat there, stone-faced--until, after about a minute, one guy near the front looked back with a wicked grin on his face. The young man thought to himself, "Well, at least one guy besides me was listening closely." The moral of the story is pay attention, because you never know what you might need to hear.*

One morning after breakfast, a young man and an older man loaded up in a truck and drove a few miles down a road that ran through a valley. The beautiful valley was diverse with crops, cattle, and sheep ranches, so it was a scenic ride. After driving a few miles, they took a gravel road off the main road and drove back toward the foothills of the mountains. A few more miles down the road, they pulled off to the side of the road and stopped the truck. They exited the truck and as they did the older man leaned against the hood of the truck and looked out over the land. The land had two pastures that were dissected by a fence that divided the properties. There were sheep in both pastures. The older man said to the younger, “I want you to take your time and have a good look at both pastures and the sheep in them and tell me what your impression is.”

The young man could tell the land was similar in terrain and such. There was no obvious difference in the pastures because of a lack of water and sun, or differences in the ground conditions. However, one side of the fence grew rich and luxurious grass, and the sheep were full of wool. They appeared healthy, happy, and relaxed. Not bothered by insects, for the farmer had treated them with salve to protect them from irritating insects. The other pasture was sparse in grass and the sheep looked agitated. They had insects flying around and, in their eyes, for they had not been treated. They seemed unhealthy.

The older man shared, “The land you are looking at was once owned by two brothers. They were both good shepherds. They worked the land by clearing trees, and planting and cultivating the best grass in the valley. When they got the land right, they bought the sheep. Like the land, they gave a lot of effort to raise the best sheep in the valley. They cared for the land and the sheep

equally. The flock was given everything they would need, especially a lot of oversight with the sheep and the land as well. As a result, for many years good profits were made by both brothers. Several years later when the brothers died, the land was divided among the two families. One share went to the son of one of the brothers. The other was sold to a man in the city who liked the idea of owning sheep and the land but knew nothing about raising them. Therefore, he hired someone to take care of the sheep and the land. Before long, the owner lost interest, and the sheep were completely dependent on the hired hand.

Amid their discussion, the older man referred to John 10, the passage about Jesus being the good shepherd. The young man, curious to another part of the passage, commented to the older man, “I also read that the sheep know a good shepherd’s voice. So, no doubt the good shepherd is trusted by the sheep because they sense he loves them and wants the best for them.” “Yes, it because of their trust in the good shepherd that the sheep do well. For example, part of sheep grazing is moving around the pasture so as to not overgraze. To do this, the good shepherd must be with the sheep during the move and the sheep must listen to the good shepherd. They move because they know the voice and trust him.”

At the close of their time overlooking the pastures, the older man asked the younger man what he believed to be the difference between the two shepherds. The young man replied, “The good shepherd knows all the needs of his sheep and he takes care of them. He is watching over them, even when they don’t understand what is happening. He loves them- and that is the difference between the two shepherds.”

*\*Story adapted from An Orphan No More by Rocky Fleming*

Can we settle on one thing today? God is “different.” By this I mean our God, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, the God we read about in the Bible, is “different” from all the other gods. Can we settle on that?

Here is the thing. God, our God, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, the God we read about in the Bible, is completely free of any dependence on the world and the

claims of the people in it, a “most high” God of absolute power, majesty, and righteousness who does not owe anyone anything and cannot be bribed. Yes? Yes!

Now, get this. You know what that means about God? It means God is “holy”- different, set apart. And not only is our God holy, but everything about God- God’s kingdom, God’s Son, God’s church, God’s sheep- is holy by way of God.

The concept of holiness as it pertains to God is easier for us to believe and grasp than as it pertains to the church or even us as God’s people. Part of the reason for this is when it comes to the church or us as God’s people, the concept of holiness is counterintelligence against the way of the world. The OT people of God are called a holy people, and the NT church is called a communion of saints because they are set apart from other people in the world by virtue of their belonging to God. We have likely heard the phrase, “in the world but not of the world.” Christians are in the world but are not to be of the world. Christians in relationship with God are holy people, people whose lives are different from the lives of others who don’t believe in or belong to God. In this context you could call Christians “resident aliens” in the world. In our believing and belonging to God, we learn from God that holiness does not mean being unrelated to the world but being related to it a particular way- specifically, to be both against the world and for the world at the same time. The kingdom of God is not only different from the kingdoms of this world (meaning it doesn’t have to have the world to survive); the kingdom of God seeks to invade, confront, oppose, and transform them. Paul claims Christians are different in that they refuse to conform to the world (Romans 12:1-21); their loyalty to God takes precedence over all other loyalties. Holiness means a protest against the ways and claims of the world. To be holy means to risk being different within the structures of the world and to be not only for oneself but for others.

Is this possible? Good question. The good news is we have a great example of which to look. We are able to define holy by looking at Jesus, his goodness, his strength, his purity, his wisdom.

**Read Colossians 1:15-20, Philippians 2:5-11**

Both of these texts illumine the holiness of Jesus, and since Jesus is the head of the body, head of the church, and we are the body, we are the church, we are made holy through him- because of him.

What does this mean? Holiness is a gift. Shirley Guthrie presses, “Who of us ever has the wisdom to make faithful yet responsible decisions on the Christian use of money? In knowing what to say and do about the use of force? In being a good husband or wife, parent or child? In knowing when to obey and when to disregard the usual rules or moral

and religious behavior? Even when we do know what we should do, who of us has the courage and ability to do it? The good news of Christ is that we are not left to ourselves to make decisions and act alone. We have the promise of the guidance and help of God's Spirit to help us when we cannot help ourselves."

How can we have this gift? In the NT no individual person, except Jesus, is ever called holy or a holy one (saint). Holy people or saints are found only in the plural, as a part of a community of people who are called and held together by the only Holy One. No one can be holy by himself or herself. The Spirit's gift of holiness is given and received in the body of Christ, the church.

Let's clear away a misunderstanding or temptation that many church goers all too often begin to think about themselves, much to the rest of the world's amusement or disgust. The people of God are not holy in that they are morally superior to other people. The truth is every sin that can be found outside the church can also be found in it, both in the lives of individuals, including clergy, and throughout entire faith traditions and denominations. Inside as well as outside there is prejudice and intolerance; personal immorality and legalist self-righteousness; cutthroat competition (have you ever played in a church basketball or softball league 😊); misrepresentation or misuse of the truth for personal or collective gain; lust for money, prestige, power, and success at all costs; pious rationalization for social justice, nationalistic arrogance, bloody wars, and economic exploitation.

So, if the church isn't different in moral superiority, then how is the church different?

- First, the church is distinguished from other "societies" precisely in that it is a community of people who know they are sinners, freely admit that they are not good or superior, take responsibility for their sinfulness without blaming someone else for it, and most important, know they need God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. "The church is the only "society or club" (and I use that loosely here) in the world that accepts as members only those who are not qualified to belong to it!"
- Second, to continue building on the first, the church is holy in that it is a community of dissatisfied sinners. In short, they are not satisfied with themselves or with the way things are in the world around them. The people of God are holy not because of what they have or what they are but because of what they are seeking to receive and become.
- Third, the church is different from all other "societies" in that it is gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. The body is holy because the head is the Holy One. When asked about the holiness of the church, Christians cannot proudly or defensively begin arguing about their own goodness, strength, purity, and wisdom. They can only

point to Jesus' goodness, strength, purity, and wisdom, like Paul declares in Colossians and Philippians.

*\*adapted from Christian Doctrine by Shirley Guthrie*

To close, let's go back to the spot where we can look out over the land of our lives. What do you see? What does the pasture of your life look like? How are you doing as a sheep of that pasture? Is your shepherd the one and only "good shepherd", the Holy One, or just another hired hand with an owner that doesn't care? And one more thing. Are you paying close enough attention to know, feel, and experience the difference?