

Beards Hollow Church - Ecumenical Vespers [August 21, 2011]

The Scripture passages we heard read and sung present 4 images of the Church.

An **institution** built on the rock of Peter (Mt. 16:13-20).

A **family** of brothers & sisters who live in unity (Psalm 133).

A **community** of prayer called to a ministry of reconciliation (Mt. 18:15-20).

A **mystery** (Romans 11:33-36).

So - which is it? Is it an institution? A family? A community? Or a mystery?  
And the answer is - **YES!** It is all of these and none of them exclusively.

The church is *more than an institution* founded on the apostles.

It is more than its leaders - then or now. It is the whole body of Christ. Sr. Anna likes to tell the story of a woman named Josephine. She took care of the candles at Immaculate Conception Parish in Scranton, PA. One day Anna overheard her talking loudly on the phone. The delivery of new candles was late, and Josephine, in her Italian accent, shouted at the candle company: "Allo. This-a the church! You send-a the candles." They arrived in two hours, even though Josephine had not given her name or the name of the parish.

We could sing this image of the church using the words of St. Paul:

♪ *We are the body of Christ* ♪

The church is *more than a building* - in Mississippi, they call the building a "*church-house*" in Ghana they call it, in their own language, a *meeting house*. In Catholic canon law it is the "*domus ecclesia*" which means "the home of the church."

The church is what this hymn describes:

♪ A-men. El Cuerpo de Cristo. A-men. La Sangre del Señor,

[Amen. The Body of Christ. Amen. The Blood of the Lord]

Eating your body, drinking your blood, we become what we receive. Amen, A-men

This song speaks of the Body and [life]Blood of Christ,

but it could also apply to the Word of God which nourishes our soul.

We become what we hear - we become the Christ whose life we see through the Scripture.

We become the Body of Christ when we live & love as he did, & still does.

We are not IN the Beard's Hollow Church,

we ARE the Beard's Hollow Church gathered here in Richmondville, NY.

The church is *more than people who speak the same language*. As we speak, there are thousands of young people gathered in a village in France called Taizé. They sing their prayers in 5-15 languages, 3 times a day all through the summer. Five to seven thousand young people of every Christian denomination, from other world religions and seekers who belong to no institution come together to pray.

This is one of their prayers:

♪ *Ubi caritas et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est* ♪ [where there is charity and love, God is present]

Here is another - in French and English.

♪ *Jésus le Christ, lumière intérieure, ne laisse pas mes ténèbres me parler.*

*Jésus le Christ, lumière intérieure, Donne moi d'accueillir ton amour.*

LORD JESUS CHRIST, YOUR LIGHT SHINES WITHIN US, LET NOT MY DOUBTS AND MY DARKNESS SPEAK TO ME.

LORD JESUS CHRIST, YOUR LIGHT SHINES WITHIN US, LET MY HEART ALWAYS WELCOME YOUR LOVE. ♪

The church is *more than a noun* - it is a **verb** - it is what happens when we love one another, when we advocate for justice, when we care for the poor, and when we gather to praise and to sing and to intercede for the world & each other.

It is what this song describes:

♪ *We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.*

[Refrain] *And they'll know we are Christians*

*by our love, by our love,*

*Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

*We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land. [Refrain]*

*We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side,  
And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride. [Refrain]*

*All praise to the Father, from whom all things come,  
And all praise to Christ Jesus, his only Son,  
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one. [Refrain]*

In a way, the church is the community who lives the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer. We become church when we live our relationship to God as *Abba, Daddy*, not only to myself as an individual, but to us together. We become church when we see ourselves as brothers & sisters, members of the family of God.

We become church when we pray and work for God's kingdom - or God's KINdom, described by Brian McClaren in his book, *Everything Must Change, Jesus, Global Crises and a Revolution of Hope*.

This book has a wonderful combination of images from the Scripture and from theological imagination; The Kingdom we pray for can be imagined as

*God's sacred ecosystem,  
the Network of God,  
the Dream of God,  
the Revolution of God,  
the Mission of God,  
the Party or Banquet of God,  
the Dance of God.*

We become church when we seek to discover the will of God and when we actually do it. We become church when we admit our need for the grace of God and for God's providence in our lives to provide our daily bread, and when we become God's instruments to provide daily bread for each other.

We become church when we forgive as we have been forgiven, both for the misuse of the gifts God has given us for doing good and for what we fail to do because we are not paying attention. The Aramaic word, "*hoba*," means BOTH "debts" & "trespasses." It means both the sins we commit [trespasses] and the good we fail to do [debts].

We become church when we let the Spirit guide our paths and pray to be aware of the destructive directions our culture and inner wounds can lead us. The Aramaic phrase, "Lead us not into temptation" really means both "Don't let us enter into temptation" and "do not let us yield to temptation." In Spanish the phrase is "no nos dejes caer en la tentacion" [let us not fall into temptation]. I often pray this phrase of the Lord's Prayer by saying, "Leave us not to temptation."

We become church when we seek to be set free from evil and the evil one.

We become church when we acknowledge that the world belongs to God, every institution that calls itself a Christian church belongs to Christ and our very bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.

In that spirit, let us pray together in words that are not only the prayer that Jesus taught us, but also express the hope of Israel and the deepest desire of every human heart. I invite you to pray it with your whole bodies and to really listen to what we are saying, because we become the Body of Christ by living in this way. As we pray this prayer, I invite you to pray the words you are familiar with, but I ask that the "debtors" wait for the "trespassers".

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom [kindom] come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses [debts] as we  
forgive those who trespass against us [our debtors].  
And lead us not into temptation [leave us not to temptation]  
But deliver us from evil [the evil one].  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever.