

August 15, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 2:36-47

Do you remember when you first learned about the concept of Utopia, the supposed “perfect community”? While people have dreamed of different political systems since the hunter and gatherer days, the concept of Utopia as we know it today is very recent. The word itself, Utopia, is Greek – it literally means “no place,” when pronounced in the Greek manner, “oo-TOE-pee-ah.” Yet, in English, we pronounce it, YOU-topia, which is a different word in Greek – Eutopia – meaning “good place.” The creator of the word, Thomas More, was in fact aware of this quirk of English when he wrote the book *Utopia*, which popularized the word widely. But how many of you have read this book, from the 16th century? This book, written in an English that predates Shakespeare and the King James Bible, describes Utopia as an island off the coast of the new world, where both overpopulation and underpopulation are controlled by colonizing the nearby landmass. Have too many citizens? Form a new colony. Too few? Recall a colony or two. In other words, while it fit many of the definitions of a good community of the day, I doubt we’d find it all that utopian today.

The concept of Utopia influenced many, many different interpretations, from Christian communes to anarcho-syndicalist independence movements. Attempts to build utopias almost always fail because they tend to be built as a reaction to society as it is, pushing back against the evils of the world. Often, this is visualized as pushing against the walls and structures that are viewed as old and stable. But, it’s more like pushing against a boat in thick swamp – it does move, and it might just lead to you falling in, if you’re not careful.

That’s one of the reasons that I find the work of L. Frank Baum so fascinating. His vision of the Emerald City at the center of the land of Oz is a utopian vision, of peoples from disparate places, with wildly different views, all living together in relative harmony. There are disagreements, mistakes, and misunderstandings, but through polite conversation and direct investigation, most

of these are worked out. But Baum wasn't content to just leave the Emerald City be – his vision of utopia was destroyed in one of his novels by the greed of a self-styled Nome King, who couldn't stand other people enjoying the emeralds that he thought were his. While in the movie *Return to Oz*, the Emerald City is restored through a magic wish, in the books it is restored through the efforts of people working together – the hard work of building community.

The church, weirdly enough, is working towards its own version of utopia. If you take all of the Christian communities of the world as one big extended family, it's also one of the longest running experiments in utopian vision, and has survived major shifts in the world that almost certainly would have collapsed nearly any other utopian vision. This view, of all of the denominations and religious orders being part of a great universal church, is the original meaning of the “church catholic” (with a small c). When we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed that we “believe in the holy catholic church,” we are not proclaiming allegiance to the Roman Catholic church (big R, big C), but instead affirming that the Spirit of God is working in this universal, invisible church that is made up of all who worship God.

I like the way that professor Justo Gonzalez puts it: “What makes the church catholic is not its presence everywhere, but rather the fact that people from everywhere are a part of it and contribute to it. Therefore, a variety of experiences and perspectives is not contrary to the catholicity of the church; quite the contrary, it is a necessary sign of it... Thus, when in the Creed we refer to the holy catholic church... we are affirming the existence of the church even in the midst of our various theologies, traditions, polities, and affirming our membership in that church.”¹

You see, there are some who think that every church should be exactly the same – and that if everyone believed and acted in the same way, well, we'd be showing true unity. Yet, just like a society made entirely of Elvis Presley impersonators would probably not survive for long, a church that is comprised of

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Apostles' Creed for Today*

completely identical people will also not last for very long. In the Great Commission, for instance, Jesus didn't say to make everyone the same, but to immerse them in the name of the Triune God, and teach them the stories of God. It's not, "go and make disciples that look like you", but "go into all the world, making disciples of all nations." We should expect that disciples of all nations would understand Christ differently – and yet, we all hold Christ at our center, and he is "with us always, even to the end of the age."

On a personal note, when I first started seriously inquiring about becoming a pastor, and showed up for a tour of a seminary, I tried to put on an act of what I assumed seminaries wanted – demure and conservative, spicing my language with Biblical quotes and Christian aphorisms, hiding my interest in science fiction and fantasy. Imagine my surprise to hear discussions of Star Wars theology, frank and open discussions on sexuality, acknowledgement of doubt and a willingness to sit in the midst of chaos in order to bring compassion, if not visible order. The best advice I received then was simply, be yourself as God is leading you. How boring Seminary would have been if everyone was the same – and how much more empty the church would feel without your particular perspective and gifts!

That's why the church universal is so important. Unlike a monolithic utopia, where everyone is either thought of as the same – or at the very least, divided into types – the "holy catholic church" that the Apostles' Creed refers to is made up of "the communion of saints." We often gloss over this part, too – but its important that we recognize that the "communion of saints" is not referring to a specific, external group of highly spiritual people – but to you and me and every believer around the globe. In the New Testament, no individual person except Jesus is ever called "holy" or a "holy one" – in other words, a saint.² Paul writes to "the saints of Corinth" but never calls any specific person there a saint. Saints are found only in the plural – as no one can be holy by themselves.

This applies equally well to our denominations, too – the church universal is

² Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*

not solely a Presbyterian community of saints, as much as we might grumble about the potential orderliness of such a system. Listen to this description by Dr. James Howell of Duke University: “Clearly, Christians don’t have their act together, but God exploits our inability, turning our shattered unity into a curious collection of broken windows, through which different kinds of broken people still manage to climb into the kingdom of God. The Baptists know the centrality of the Bible. The Quakers embrace the need for silence. Methodists try to engage social issues. The Roman Catholics embody the rich tradition of the faith... Mennonites are humble, Presbyterians use their brains, and AME Zions can out-sing us all.... In fact, we have in common the only thing that really matters: Jesus Christ.”³

The early church struggled with this, too. Though in the heady days after Pentecost, as described in Acts 2, the members of the Jerusalem church pooled their property and worked for mutual benefit, the church would eventually shift from a small group of people trying to survive in a harsh and oppressive world into the dominant power in a large part of that world – and later lose that dominance to internal corruption created from holding both spiritual and political power.

Yes, the church does best when it is not trying to project a forceful presence into the world, but instead is listening to the leading of the Spirit. That leading may be different for different people – and that’s great! As part of this Holy Universal Community, we need to be open to listening to each other and the Spirit, each step along the way. Yes, we are responsible for following Christ’s path – but Christ is with us. Even if we step off, even if we run and hide in cave along the way, Christ will guide us back, one by one, and together in denominations and united ministries. It is not yet the end of the age.

And so, may Christ guide us, the Spirit sustain us, and God set the path before us. Amen.

³ James Howell, *The Life We Claim*