

**SERMON – 09/30/07**  
**Christianity's Family Tree – Catholicism**  
*Psalm 95:6-7 & John 6:53-56*

When I was a kid, I was totally into sports (surprise!)... I loved watching sports... playing sports... talking about sports... reading about sports...

- And I even collected baseball & football cards.
  - Are there any other people here who used to collect baseball & football cards?
  - I don't mean the kind of collecting that involves protector sheaths and price lists and acrylic card holders...
  - I'm talking about the "buy-them-at-the-drug-store-then-chew-the-piece-of-gum-and-then-trade-'em-with-your-friends" kinds of cards.
  - (I know, and if I would have put them in those acrylic card holders, I'd have enough money now to put both of my kids through college... oh well!)
- One of the things that I always loved about baseball & football cards back in the mid to 1970's was along with the player's stats on the back of the card... they also usually had an unusual fact!
  - I pulled my cards out of storage this week and found a few examples... these are Topps' 1974 baseball cards...
  - Here's Dwight Evans' card... Boston Redsox OF... the front... and the back... here on the bottom right corner you'll see the "fun fact": "Dwight grew 3" since entering pro ball."
  - Superstar pitcher, Jim Palmer (and by the way, I used to deliver newspapers to his parents in Scottsdale, AZ!)... his fact: "Jim wore a lucky pair of socks winning 10 games straight" (doesn't say if he ever washed them, though!).
  - Bruce Dal Canton: "Bruce is writing a paper on sore arms for school." (I guess that's important for pitchers...)
  - George Theodore: "George likes marshmallow milk shakes."
  - Ron Bryant: "Ron has a lucky teddy bear he keeps in his locker." (I can only imagine he got teased quite a bit by his buddies after this came out!)
  - And finally... Jim Holt... whose fun fact is: "Jim enjoys watching television." (How long do you think it actually took them to come up with that one?! 'Did you ask him? Me neither. Let's just say he likes TV!').

- Today we enter week 2 in our series on CHRISTIANITY’S FAMILY TREE... and if there was a baseball card for me, here’s the “unusual facts” about me that would be on it...
  - “Jim’s mother was once a Catholic nun!?!” (How many people can say THAT, eh?!?)
  - It’s true... my mom was once a nun at one point in her life (and even taught at an all-girls Catholic school)...
  - But the honest truth is, I never really knew much about Catholicism growing up...
  - One of the sad facts about our Christian family tree... is that recently quite a bit of distance has been made between the Catholic & Protestant branches...
  - It drives me crazy when I hear someone ask another: “Are you Catholic or Christian?”
  - Let me say this as plainly as I can... Catholics are indeed Christians, my friends!
  - And this week we’re going to spend a little time getting to know this branch of our Christian family tree...
  - And just maybe along the way, we’ll find something about their faith that will in turn help strengthen our own!

Again, I’d like to give credit to United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton, whose study guide on this very series has been my inspiration...

- Catholics make up the largest group of Christians in the world... **over 1 billion followers**... as many as all Protestants and Orthodox Christians combined!
  - In the United States, Protestants outnumber Catholics 2:1... but Catholics outnumber United Methodists 8:1!
  - Catholics are still 23% of the population – four times more than the next-largest Christian denomination.
- If you were here last Sunday, you’ll remember that in the early church, the major division was between Jewish Christians & Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians... as part of ONE church!
  - There weren’t Catholics, Protestants & Orthodox Christians... everyone was simply a follower of “The Way”... a believer in Jesus Christ.
  - Over time, as the church developed, the word *catholic* was used to describe the church. *Catholic* means “**universal**.” It was originally not the name of a denomination.
  - In fact, the early church often said they were “one holy, catholic & apostolic church.”
- As we learned last week, there were churches in both the East and West... but by the end of the first century, Rome was clearly the center of the church.

- It was the power center of the empire, and likely had the largest number of Christians of any city in the empire by the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- Over time, **Latin** became the dominant language of the western half of the Roman Empire; and although the New Testament was written in Greek, Latin soon became the language of the Western church as well.
- Because of all these factors, the bishop of Rome came to be regarded as the most influential of the bishops.
- It wasn't until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the bishop of Rome came to be known as "pope" – a term that simply means "father."
- More telling was the fact that the bishop of Rome called the other bishops "sons."
- Not all of them appreciated this, of course, but by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the authority of the pope was generally accepted among the Western churches... and grudgingly accepted by most of the Eastern churches, too.
- Eventually, though, these churches split... and it became official in 1054 when the leaders of the Orthodox & Catholic churches excommunicated each other – and all members of each other's churches!
  - It was at this point that the Christian church was officially no longer "one church."
  - Last week I showed you this slide... it's the way the Orthodox Church views history. That they alone have carried on the true apostolic succession of Jesus & the early church.
  - This is how the Catholic church views history, however... they have kept the faith over the centuries, and both their Orthodox and Protestant brothers & sisters have diverted from the pathway.
- I mentioned last week that the goal of this series is not to show you how the Methodist Church has got it right, and everyone else is wrong...
  - It's also not to find the craziest differences between the churches and lift up those elements of the faith that cause the greatest controversy.
  - Every denomination... every Church... every Christian is a mix of both the good and the not-so-good... that's part of being human.
  - This series will attempt to give a general overview of our sister denominations... and bring to our attention a few things that each group does really well... so that we might be more faithful & effective followers of Jesus.
- As Protestants, we agree with the essentials of faith as articulated by our Catholic friends.

- Both the Nicene Creed (which we read together last week) & the Apostles' Creed are a part of our worship tradition.
- The differences between Protestants & Catholics arise from the **traditions** of the church and the **doctrines** that spring from them.
- Protestants look to the Bible as the primary source of faith & practice...
- Catholics also see the Bible as the source of faith & practice... but they hold that the Holy Spirit didn't cease to guide the church into the truth after the apostles died.
- Like the Orthodox, Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit continued to reveal truth & doctrine through the bishops, theologians & councils of the church as they reflected on the Scriptures.
- Jesus told his disciples that he was sending the Holy Spirit to be their guide after he died... if we ignore the tradition the church has had in interpreting the Bible over the centuries, then a Catholic will argue that we're ignoring Jesus' commands.
- That's why church leaders, bishops, councils & theologians have had such an impact on the Catholic church.
- Not to mention the fact that the New Testament itself, as we know it today, didn't come into its final form until the Council of Rome in 382... that's when bishops & other leaders chose which books would be part of the canon.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of visiting with Father Mike Dalton, one of the priests at Saint Elizabeth's Catholic Church, just a block up the street from us on Moanalua Road.

- Did you know that close to 3,000 people pass through this newly-renovated sanctuary over 6 worship services (or "masses") every weekend (Sat/Sun).
  - They are a vibrant & very active community of faith!
- I talked with Father Mike about the Catholic worship service... and how they worship with their whole bodies...
  - He said it starts when they walk into the sanctuary, and they're greeted by the baptismal font... reminding them of their baptism. They're encouraged to dip their fingers into the holy water as a sign of remembrance!
  - When the worship service begins and ends, they make the sign of the cross (*note: do this for the congregation*)... as they do whenever the name of the Trinity is pronounced... it's a way of saying, "Father, Son & Holy Spirit I am yours. Cover me, fill me, have me."

- Holy oil is up at the front of the congregation... they have three different kinds: one for baptism, one for adult confession/confirmation, and the third for anointing the sick.
- When I went to the opening worship service in their renovated sanctuary, the Catholic Bishop in Hawaii took the holy oil and spread it all over their altar & the sides of their walls... reenacting an ancient biblical practice.
- Whenever scripture is read, Father Mike said each person touches their head, lips & heart... reminding them that God's word resides in their minds, in their words, and in their souls!
- When they celebrate communion (which is every worship service), they kneel during the prayer as a sign of respect, devotion & adoration...
- There's a point in the communion liturgy when the priest holds up the bread and asks God to make it the body of Christ... bells are rung... so the congregation gets an audible reminder of the importance of the moment!
- One of the things our Catholic brothers and sisters do really well is RITUAL...
  - A ritual is a habit... and the good ones help shape our souls.
  - One of the aftermaths of the Protestant Reformation has unfortunately been a tendency for Protestants to dismiss ritual as something dead & devoid of meaning...
  - But it's in this realm, especially, that the Catholics have much to teach us.
  - The **rosary** is a prayer tool used to recount the stories of Mary & Jesus... while offering scriptural words of affirmation & prayer)...
  - The beads help remind the devotee of specific prayers to pray... and the rosary, in general, also incorporates meditations on the mysteries of Christ (his birth, suffering & death, resurrection & ascension, and his character & teachings).
  - Many Catholic churches will also have the **Stations of the Cross** in their sanctuaries... At St. Elizabeth's, people can prayerfully follow along their beautiful stained glass windows, remembering the passion & death of Jesus...
  - If you've ever been inside a Catholic church, you may have noticed a **candle** or two... Father Mike admitted that Catholics love their candles!
  - Parishioners can come into the sanctuary at any time in the week... and light a candle for someone they'd like to pray for... the candle can burn for hours, marking one's petition before the Lord.
  - They have a **Pascal Candle** (Christ Candle) at the front left side of the sanctuary... which they light at baptisms & funerals... reminding all of our connection to Christ!

- I also asked Father Mike about the role that **MARY** has in Catholicism...
  - He had the same response that Father Demetrius from the Orthodox church had when I asked him about icons...
  - “We don’t worship Mary,” Father Mike said immediately.
  - “Our focus is on the Trinity... however, we also have an emphasis on significant people in the life of Jesus.
  - “Mary was there from the beginning of Jesus’ life to the end of his life on earth...
  - “And so we recognize God blessing us through other people. That’s why Mary becomes a focal point for our faith.
  - “But it’s bad theology when the focus moves away from the Trinity and rests instead solely on Mary,” he said.
- But perhaps the single most-important spiritual practice of Catholic Christians is the **Eucharist** (or Holy Communion)...
  - For Catholics, the Eucharist is the main point of the entire worship service. It’s the climactic conclusion and the most-important part of what happens when they gather for worship.
  - In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Eucharist is God’s presence.
  - At a Holy Mass, when the priest says the words of Christ and gives a prayer to the Holy Spirit to change the substance of the bread and wine, they believe that although these elements do not change in their appearance, their actual substances will change, so that what they receive is literally Christ’s presence.
  - Catholics believe that in the midst of the prayer offered by the priest, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. This is also known as “transubstantiation.” Generally, Protestants don’t ascribe to this belief.
  - Father Mike told me that they keep (or “reserve”) the reserved sacrament... the consecrated wafers... in the tabernacle at the front of the church...
  - And because they believe it’s the literal body of Christ, people can come into the church and spend time with the Savior next to the tabernacle.
  - I asked Father Mike to share with our congregation a little bit more of why the Eucharist is so important to our Catholic brothers and sisters... I apologize if it’s a little difficult to hear (I’m not a professional videographer!)...
  - Here’s what Father Mike said...

- As we close this sermon on Catholicism, I know I didn't even begin to come close to describing everything there is to know...
  - But hopefully you began to understand a little bit more about our Catholic brothers and sisters...
  - Let me leave you with two thoughts...
  - First, I've been greatly impressed by the deep **reverence** so many Catholics display. We Protestants like to talk about our personal relationship with Jesus... we think of him as our friend, companion & brother...
  - But many Catholics see Jesus first and foremost as the “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords”... and there's something to be said for that. I wonder how we might incorporate a bit more reverence in our Christian faith?
- Finally, I have to come back to the Eucharist...
  - Here at Aiea UMC, we normally celebrate Holy Communion once a month... on the first Sunday... (some churches only do it once a quarter!)
  - Some of you may wonder what's the big deal... why the necessity of receiving communion weekly (or even daily)?
  - When we receive the bread and wine (or, in our case, grape juice)... we aren't just participating in a nice remembrance... when we come to the table together, we're being transported back 2000 years to the foot of the cross...
  - And we recognize that Jesus' actions are given for us today... for us!
  - Ignatius of Antioch, writing in AD 107 on his way to martyrdom, described the Eucharist as “the medicine of immortality, the antidote against death”...
  - Forgiveness. Healing. Grace. Salvation. New Life. Love.
- I pray that from this day forward, each of us might look a little bit differently towards our Catholic brothers and sisters... and recognize that each of us are authentic followers of Jesus Christ...
  - Different in many ways, yes... but similar in so many others...
  - May we begin to understand that we all are part of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

AMEN.