

“On This Rock”

Matthew 16:13-29

October 7, 2007

Matthew 16:13-29

Today we begin a series looking at the church. As you may recall, we preached through the gospel of Mark last year as we focused our attention on the question “Who is this?” Then, after Easter, we turned to the Holy Spirit and the latter part of 1 Corinthians. Through the summer and concluding last Sunday, we read through Daniel to dwell on the sovereignty of God. And, now, the church.

The church may seem like a strange topic. I do not need to convince you to come, you are already here. Most of the time when we – myself included – think of the “church” an image of the sanctuary and this campus come to mind. We know that is not accurate. Over the next several weeks, we are going to look at what is the church’s mission, what the church does, and other aspects of life as the church.

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. Christians all over the world are celebrating the Lord’s Supper. We take this time to remember all of those who have gone before us, Christians who have lived faithful lives and worked to pass along the faith to us. We take this time to remember all of those Christians around the world who are celebrating along side us, some who are suffering persecution and some who are dying to pass along the faith to their children. We take this time to remember our children to whom we owe the obligation of bearing witness, persevering, and exhibiting the love of God through our lives. It is a witness to the world by the universal church.

As an aside, when we recite the Apostles’ Creed on communion Sunday mornings, some of you have wondered why we say, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” “Catholic” in that phrase begins with a small “c.” It does not mean that we are a part of the Roman Catholic Church. The Apostles’ Creed was developed at a time in the Western hemisphere when there was only one church and the word “catholic” means “universal.” Thus, when we say, “I believe in the holy catholic church,” it is a reflection of our participation in the church that Jesus founded upon Peter’s confession.

1. Profession of faith

Why was Peter’s profession so significant? It is significant because Jesus said it was significant. That sounds like a circular statement, but it is true: it is significant because Jesus said it was significant. Jesus was uniquely positioned to be able to know what was important.

Peter’s confession was more than important; in fact, Jesus said it was foundational. It is the cornerstone. Foundations are key things. Ask the people in Mount Soledad about foundations and the importance of building on a solid rock.

Even though the imagery is of a building, the word for “church” is ecclesia, a gathering of people. In context, ecclesia is defined as a “congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership.” (Louw & Nida) It involves an assembly of persons and a well-defined membership. Well-defined membership: those who profess the conviction that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God are members and those who do not, are not.

Jesus was revealing and anticipating people would gather in his name. He was revealing he would take an active role in gathering people together for the purpose of worshiping him.

We gather today to worship him. We gather to proclaim Jesus the Messiah, the savior, the Christ, the Lord. Those titles make him more important than the Chargers game, more important than soccer games, more important than sleeping in or reading the paper or washing the car. We remember the futility and hopelessness of our lives before receiving him as Lord and Savior. We remember how “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sins.” We realize that our salvation is dependent upon him.

The church is more than a social club. It is more than a charitable society. It is more than a place to give kids good, moral upbringing.

How many of you have heard people say, “I believe in Jesus, I just don’t think I need to be part of a church.” Friends, those are contradictory statements. To believe in Jesus is to submit yourself to his command. To believe in Jesus means you understand that Jesus himself is building the church. To reject the church means you reject Jesus. So, when someone says to you, “I can worship on my own, I do not need anyone else,” correct them. If they say they don’t believe Jesus, pray for them.

Professing Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God means that worship is not an option; it is a responsibility and a privilege. The Lord of all creation has commanded us to worship. The Redeemer has called us to be in relationship with him. The heir of the kingdom of heaven has invited us to grow as co-heirs with him.

Peter’s profession is a statement of discipleship. The only requirement for membership in this church is the profession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. With membership comes responsibilities:

A faithful member accepts Christ’s call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of his Church. Such involvement includes:

- a . proclaiming the good news,
- b . taking part in the common life and worship of a particular church ,
- c . praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church,
- d . supporting the work of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,

- e . participating in the governing responsibilities of the church,
- f . demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- g . responding to God’s activity in the world through service to others,
- h . living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- i . working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment.

That’s a long list of responsibilities, but it all begins with Christ’s call. “A faithful member accepts Christ’s call...”

The church is made up of the people who have accepted Jesus’ call to “follow me,” who profess with their mouths and their lives that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

2. Revealed by God

Peter did not think up his confession all by himself. Jesus says to him, “Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah (son of Jonah). For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Peter had eyes to see and ears to hear what God had revealed to him.

But consider Peter’s situation: he was not out in the wilderness, he was not on a mountaintop, he was not on the ocean, he was not on a personal retreat searching for himself; he was in community with the other disciples and their attention was on Jesus. He had accepted Jesus’ call to, “follow me.”

How are you following Jesus? Is it at a distance, like a research project; is it out of loyalty, something you’ve always done that kind of makes you feel better; or are do you have eyes to see and ears to hear what God is revealing to you? There are a few cases where God knocks people down to reveal something to them (Saul on the road to Damascus), but more often it is like Elijah’s experience on the mountain. Elijah waited through strong Santa Ana winds, through a San Andreas Fault earthquake, through a raging wildfire (could have been here in San Diego) in order to wait for God’s still small voice in the silence.

Following Jesus is more than a Sunday morning activity. You cannot see everything God has in store for you if you are only looking for an hour on Sunday morning. Sunday morning is a staging ground, not an end point. Sunday morning is an opportunity to share what you have seen, to be encouraged by the testimony of others, and to renew our mission out to the community. The “a-ha!” moments take place in the daily walk with Jesus.

The church is made up of the people who walk daily with Jesus, responding to his call to “follow me,” and have eyes to see and ears to hear what God is revealing to them.

3. Will persevere against the attacks of hell

Jesus said, “The gates of Hell (Hades) will not prevail against it.” The power of evil and the power of death will not be able to overcome the church founded on the profession of Jesus Christ as the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

That’s not to say that the gates of Hell will not rage against the church. It has, it does, it will. Being part of the church does not mean that all the worldly fighting, tension, problems, and hurts will not touch you. The people of the church are constantly being attacked.

The church is attacked by the world. The church is a target for ridicule in movies, television, and the stage; there are exceptions, but those exceptions are notable because they are exceptions. Remember the controversy that surrounded the making of the movie, “The Passion,” simply because it was being made; compare that with the critical protection that surrounded movies like “The Last Temptation of Christ.” Further, with how much glee did the media report Mel Gibson’s problems?

And that’s a small example of our American version of persecution. Christians around the world face even greater threats. China, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan (Korean hostages), Nigeria, North Korea are among the places where Christians are jailed, beaten or killed. On January 27 of this year, a Presbyterian missionary and her daughter were shot and killed in a targeted carjacking in Nairobi, Kenya. The gates of Hell will rage against the church from outside.

Attacks are not limited to the outside of the church. Anyone who has worked in a church, volunteered in a church, or served on a committee will be able to tell you just how far from “heavenly” the church can be. One of the most consistent frustrations for people is that the church is full of hypocrites. The politics, the personalities and the pressures all drive people crazy and make them wonder, “Why would I bother?” Historically, the institutional church has had its own low-points: the Crusades, indulgences, the German church’s capitulation to the Nazi’s, racism, and cults rank up there. The gates of Hell will rage against the church from inside.

Attacks are not external to us, either. They are internal. Temptation is a very real part of life. It comes in so many forms: obvious and subtle. Cheating and stealing and murder and lying and gossiping are obvious. “Well, I’m a pretty good person, so God won’t mind if I do just this *one* thing...” is much more subtle. Succumbing to temptation can be defeating if we do not cling to Jesus.

There’s a song being played on Christian radio these days by a group called Casting Crowns. The song is entitled, The Voice of Truth:

Oh what I would do
To have the kind of faith it takes
To climb out of this boat I'm in
Onto the crashing waves
To step out of my comfort zone
Into the realm of the unknown
where Jesus is
And He's holding out His hand

But the waves are calling out my name
And they laugh at me
Reminding me of all the times
I've tried before and failed
The waves they keep on telling me
Time and time again. "Boy, you'll never win!"
"You'll never win!"

Chorus: But the voice of truth tells me a different story
The voice of truth says, "Do not be afraid!"
The voice of truth says, "This is for My glory"
Out of all the voices calling out to me
I will choose to listen and believe the voice of truth

Outside, inside, internally within us, the gates of Hell will rage. However, the gates of Hell will not *prevail* against the Church that Jesus is building, will not prevail against the people who cling to Jesus.

How will the church prevail against the attacks of hell? By following Jesus. Jesus engaged the battle immediately after Peter's confession. He started heading towards Jerusalem, where he would be crucified, killed. He invited the disciples to pick up their crosses and follow him. Jesus invited the disciples to lose their lives for his sake. But how is that prevailing?

The church will prevail because God is victorious. Jesus was obedient unto death, even death on a cross. God raised him from the dead, giving him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow – in heaven on earth and under the earth – and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The church will prevail because Jesus prevails. The church will prevail because Jesus has said it will prevail. The church will prevail because it is Jesus who is building it. The church will prevail because Jesus leads it, feeds it, strengthens it, and gives its mission and purpose.

Conclusion

What does all this talk about the church mean to you and me? Very simply this: Jesus Christ called us together to “follow him,” to bear witness to his identity as Savior and Lord, and to cling to him as the gates of Hell rage against us. The Christian life is different; “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The church is the gathering of all those who have accepted Jesus’ call to be disciples, those who proclaim Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. We come together, called by God, to lay down our lives at the foot of the cross for Jesus’ sake.

We come to the table this morning because Jesus said to come. We come to “do this in remembrance of me.” It is a celebration of Jesus’ identity as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It is a revelation of God’s grace and salvation offered to you and me. And it is a confirmation of the victory Jesus has won for his church, those who follow him, prevailing even over death and the gates of Hell.

Church is not just a habit or a voluntary activity. It is the gathering of those who are saved by the grace of God. “On this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”

So, it comes back to the foundational question Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 Invitation/Communion

10:00 Hymn