

Sermon for August 23, 2020

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Sermon Texts: Matthew 16: 13-20 and Romans 12: 1-8

Sermon Title: *The Church has left the building*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we come before you from different places and with different experiences. Some of us have succeeded in our careers and feel blessed. Some of us have been affected by circumstances beyond our control and we come seeking reassurance. But, no matter what our experience, we all come to worship this morning to meet you. Show us your vision; remind us of your values; renew our identity as your people, and invigorate us for your holy work in the world. Amen.

LET US PRAY: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Light and illuminate our darkness; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us from within; come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

Two decades ago, someone who came to church weekly was considered an active member of a congregation; today, if someone comes once a month, even the pastor might consider them active. Things have changed. Many Americans describe themselves as religious, but not very interested in organized religion. Some might say that they are Christian, but not members of a congregation. A pastor was once talking to someone who made it clear that *he* didn't believe in organized religion and had no interest in belonging to a church. The pastor had an interesting reply: "*Well then, you should come to the Presbyterian Church because we're not very organized at all!*" That could never have been said by a pastor of South Plains!

We are in strange and difficult times now, and these times are particularly trying for the church. At least for a time, most churches have left the building, and many will stay off campus for some time to come. You can live as a caring, sensitive person outside church, so what does it mean to be church when we meet by Zoom? Today's Gospel from Matthew gives us the answer.

Many of the passages we have been studying in Matthew involve the question of Jesus' identity. You may remember from last week that the Canaanite woman called Jesus *Lord, Son of David*, a title that his own people have withheld from Jesus. The question of identity is at the heart of today's passage as well.

Jesus has come to Caesarea Philippi with the disciples, a whole bunch of miracles trailing after him. Every once in a while, he quizzes the disciples to see how well they have understood him. Today, Jesus asks a very specific question: "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" They respond: "*Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*" These are all safe answers that they give - in their responses, they declare that Jesus' ministry is right up there with the big names in Hebrew Scripture. But Jesus isn't interested in his inner circle repeating what the crowds

have said. He is interested in their response. So he presses them further: *“But who do you say that I am?”* Wonderful old Peter, the first one out of the gate, the first one to leave his nets to follow Jesus, the first one out of the boat to try to walk on water. Peter blurts out his answer: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Right answer!

You might think that when Peter gives the “correct” answer, that Jesus would go into some detail and some explanation about what being the Messiah means. But Jesus doesn’t do that. Instead, he tells Peter who Peter is” *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* Jesus first uses the masculine form of the word for rock *“Petros,”* then switches to the feminine form *“petra.”* You are Petros, and on this petra I will build my church. Same word, different form, but the distinction is enormous. Petros – the name Jesus gives Peter – means a small piece of a larger rock; on the other hand, petra means a great big rock. Peter is a piece of the rock, and the church will be built on lots of small pebbles like Peter.

To be a “petros” – a small piece of a larger rock is to make the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah is what makes church church, not our programs, our fellowship, our mission, our building, or anything else. Everything is built on our proclamation, the church’s proclamation, that Jesus is the Messiah. We are church whether we are in our beautiful sanctuary or on Zoom.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a woman who left church one Sunday morning and passed a man who looked like he had seen better days. She passed by, but the man called out to her: *Is this your church?* When the woman replied that it was, he asked *What do you believe?* The woman couldn’t come up with an answer. After an awkward encounter, the man said *That’s alright, it doesn’t matter anyway,* and he walked away. What a difference it might have made if the woman had replied: *We believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Come and let me introduce you to our pastor.*

If we as Christians confess with our mouths that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then that profoundly affects the way we live.

Paul’s description of the new life in Christ in Romans tells us how we are to live as Christians, chosen by God, transformed by grace. *“Do not be conformed to this world,”* says Paul, *but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

We usually interpret freedom as the ability to do what we want. Paul’s view of freedom is something entirely different. God has freed us from sin through Christ. For Paul, the key to retaining our freedom is to exercise that freedom to love one another. Transformation gets lived out in the body, and the welfare of the community becomes more important than the welfare of self. There is a change in priorities. The body has many members, Paul reminds us, with different gifts, but we are one body in Christ. Then Paul gives a whole list of virtues that will build up that community.

The story of Peter's last encounter with Jesus is not told in Matthew, but in John. It is early morning and the resurrected Christ has just cooked breakfast for the disciples. Three times Jesus asks Peter "*Do you love me?*" to which Peter replies "*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*" Three times Jesus replies: "*Feed my sheep.*" We show our gratitude for what God has done for us by feeding Jesus' sheep.

When Betsy, Pat, and Heide meet in Kirk Hall to organize the yarn they have collected or to sort out the baby caps and hospital gowns they and others have made, they are feeding Jesus' sheep. They are being church. When the finance committee meets and Don opens with prayer that we will be good stewards of our resources, the committee is being church. When Fran sends a note to celebrate a birthday or to cheer up someone who has been ill, she is being church. I could go on with countless examples.

There is nothing about Peter, there is nothing about us, that can earn the keys of the Kingdom. Peter is a rock because he is a chip off the Rock of Ages, and it is on this relationship that the church is built. The right answer appears to Peter, and to us, not because we're that smart, but because we have been chosen by God to be the church. To confess that Jesus is the Messiah is step into a life as transformed people, chips off the Rock of Ages against which even the power of death cannot prevail.

Let everyone unmute. And let us say in a loud voice, a cacophony of voices: *Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.* Friends, we are church. Amen.