

I Will Build My Church
Matthew 16:13-20
August 27, 2017

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus say: “*I will build my church*” (Mt 16:18 NIV). Did you ever give that much thought? Jesus built, and is building, his church. The church is not something that just evolved from people of like mind. The church, both universal and local, is an entity intentionally created by Jesus with specific parameters, paradigms, and goals.

However, today, church is almost a bad word. In much of today's world, the church is out of fashion. People don't see regular church attendance as a plus on someone's resume. There is a widespread feeling that spiritually is very important, but church isn't.

Someone once said, “The world at its worst – needs the church at its best,” and that couldn't be truer. The world has been driven to its knees by an epidemic of sin and, without the church to point the way, the world can't even see its own fatal condition.

Consequently, rather than use this message to expound on the text, as we usually do, we are going to use our time to examine the aspects of the church, both universal and local, as they are described in the Bible. The biblical view of the church is that of a family, a fellowship, a flock, a building, a bride, and a body.

Let's look first at how the Bible defines the word church. Scripture uses church to describe two different things. One definition of church is the body of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Membership in this church transcends all barriers of race, ethnic origin, gender, age, education, social status, economic level, denomination, and even time. This church has no respect for all the barriers humans create to separate themselves from one another.

The church is also described as a specific group of people in a specific time and place. As we sit here today, we are members of the church universal, also called the invisible church, and we are members of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. Interestingly, we hold dual membership in the one church of our Lord.

There are also some descriptive metaphors used to define the paradigm of the church.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls the church a body and his comparison is with a human body. Paul says that just as all the parts of the human body work together for the good of the whole body, the members of the church body should work in concert to create unity, unselfishness, uniqueness, and understanding.

To the Christians at Ephesus, Paul compared the church to a building. Just as a building is made of many individual stones all receiving their positioning according to the cornerstone, the church is built of many different individual believers all leaning on the cornerstone of Christ for their direction and alignment.

Both Paul and John refer to the church as the bride of Christ. This metaphor can be of great comfort to us. Being the bride of Christ emphasizes the intimate and eternal nature of the relationship between Jesus and his church. As members of that church, we all have the same intimate and eternal relationship with our Lord.

The Bible also tells us that the church has certain ministries to carry out, certain jobs it's supposed to be doing. The most pressing of these ministries is carrying out the evangelism and mission work of the Great Commission. Jesus commands the church to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The primary job of the church is not to care for the people in the pews. The primary job of the church is evangelism, to care for those outside of these walls.

There is also the command to teach Christians everything Christ has told us. Institutions of Christian education are one way to do this, but they aren't the only way or even the best way. The best way to teach what Christ has commanded happens when parents teach their children. Of course, this teaching hinges on the parents having learned what Jesus commands and the best way for that to happen is corporate Bible study.

The church has also been given the assignment of edification. Edification means to build up. The pastors and leaders of the church have a unique responsibility to build up the believers so they can carry out the ministry of the church. Believers need to be taught God's Word in all its truth and purity so they can understand it, believe it, and defend it.

Another ministry obligation of the church is encouragement. All Christians need encouragement. You know as well as I do it's not easy being a Christian. That is, it's not easy being a committed Christian. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh are in constant battle for the destruction of the Christian's faith. Encouragement is one of the best weapons a Christian has in this war and encouragement happens when the body acts like a unified body.

One of the blessings Jesus gave his church was the office of the pastor. The word pastor comes from the word for shepherd. The pastor, like a shepherd, is to tend, train, and lead the flock. For this reason, pastors are to be called, consecrated, compassionate, courageous, consistent, compelled, and commissioned. The duty of

flock is to support, uplift, encourage, and follow. Of course, a flock which doesn't want to be led doesn't need a shepherd.

Another blessing God has given his church is its unique message. The message of the Christian church is all about salvation, sanctification, separation, stewardship, and service. We speak of salvation because only Christianity delivers the good news of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, through grace, and not by works.

Because of the salvation we freely receive by the grace of God, we look to the Holy Spirit for sanctification so we might lead God-pleasing lives. We also separate ourselves from the sinful things of this world so we might be witnesses for our Lord. We practice responsible stewardship over all of the blessings God has given us from our physical bodies to all of God's creation. And, in recognition of the service Christ gave to us on the cross, we seek out ways to serve others, especially so we might share the love of Christ with the unsaved.

Now, if there were someone here today who never had any contact with Christianity, that person might, at this point, ask, "Why." Why should the church do all these things? What is the motivating force that would make Christians live together as one body, that would compel them to evangelize, educate, edify, encourage, lead, teach, and care for one another?

The answer to that question is another facet of Christianity that sets it apart from all other religions of the world. I had a professor at the seminary ask our class, "How many religions are there?" Of course, there are only two religions. There are religions of law and the religion of Gospel.

All religions, except Christianity, teach that paradise can be reached only by those who follow a certain set of rules and regulations. Your sins will be forgiven if you do certain penance. God will love you more if you go on certain pilgrimages. Praying at specific times of the day and facing a certain direction when you pray will help to ensure your salvation. Don't drink, don't dance, don't play cards, don't go to movies.

These and numerous other things are the requirements of religions of law. The law dictates the things you must do and things you must not do. Anything less than perfect obedience will be punished. Knowing these things, what is the motivation in a religion of law? Fear. Law always brings fear and fear is a powerful motivator, but fear is not the motivating force of Christianity.

The Christian and the Christian church are motivated by love and loyalty. We do the things we do, not because we're afraid of our God, but because we love our God. Our loyalty to the Lord springs from his loyalty to us. When we were lost in our sin, when we had no hope, the Lord provided for us the salvation we could never provide for ourselves. Such an act of pure love for us gives birth to our love for him. We serve him because we love him. We love him because he first loved us and gave his life for us.

The last thing that defines the church as the church is its membership. The church is made up of the redeemed. The true members of the church are those who hold Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Church membership is a serious matter and should not be taken lightly. Before joining a church, you should be sure you are in full agreement with all the teachings of that church so you can make a total commitment to the church and its ministries.

Total commitment to the church means you regularly attend worship services, you give the church your financial support, and you participate in the Bible studies and outreach ministries of the church. A church whose membership is divided on commitment is a church that is divided. Jesus said anything divided against itself will not endure.

The church of Jesus Christ can be one of the greatest blessings in life. The church can be a good source of worth, strength, and some much needed love and understanding. But the church is made up of people; not perfect people, just people. That being the case, we must never stop working to make the church everything our Lord intends for it to be. I'll close with a story that might help you remember what God's church is to be like.

One day, during Vacation Bible School, a new student was brought into the room. The little boy had one arm missing, and the teacher was nervous that one of the other children would say something insensitive to him. At the end of the day, she asked the children to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Let's make our churches," she said, putting her hands together to form the "church."

"Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and..." Suddenly the awful truth struck her. The very thing she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Josh, let's make the church together."