

What is Right with the Church?

Matthew 16:13-20

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And 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. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

What is right with the church? I must admit it would be much easier to talk about all the problems the church is facing. The church seems to have lost touch with reality. Many people look at organized religion and call it irrelevant and rightfully so. The church has played the political game and allowed the Gospel message to be repackaged into partisan politics. The biggest fault of the church may be its unwillingness to change. We push business models to reorganize and run the church and thinking that if we find the magic program it will turn the church around.

Unfortunately, there are people, some of you here today, that have been scared by the things wrong with the church. You carry those scars as reminders that sometimes religion goes bad.

As you can see it is easy to talk about all of the problems facing the church. However, I do believe the church has some good news and there are some things right with the church.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a lady who walks out of the sanctuary one Sunday morning and bumps into a lost-looking man on the sidewalk. He looks up at the steeple of the church and asks, “Tell me, what is it that you believe in there?” The woman stammered and stumbled and never could make a complete sentence. Finally, the man said, “Never mind, I’m sorry if I bothered you.”

How would you have responded to that question? Remember, most people can tell if your answer is coming from you mind or your heart! People don’t want intellectual answers; they want answers that come from our hearts.

This past week, I was a part of a committee interviewing a ministerial candidate. He had submitted several single spaced pages of answers to the questions we had ask. Our first comment to him was, now that we know that the books say, tell us what you think!

Jesus was concerned about his ministry. He had come to a region that was filled with intellectual competence. He and the twelve were up in the district of Caesarea Philippi. It was a place filled with much symbolism.

The town was named for two Roman rulers - Caesar Augustus and Philip. There was a Greek temple there, built in honor of the Greek god Pan. It was located near the headwaters of the Jordan River. So, the place was alive with the symbolism of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem.

It was somewhere out in the country that Jesus must have stood on a little hill, and looked far off down south toward Jerusalem. As he stood there looking, the wind blew his hair across his face. He brushed it back, and said to the twelve: "Who do men say the son of man is?"

Jesus had feed the thousands, he at calmed the sea, dealt with Peter's lack of faith, and been challenged by the Samaritan woman.

Jesus wanted to know how he was doing! I can identify with that feeling. Every time I preach, I always ask Vicki how I did. You know, I haven't preached a bad sermon yet!

Jesus wanted to know how he was doing! So, the disciples started guessing. They answered, "Some say John the Baptizer, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

Then Jesus turned toward them, and gave them that look only he possessed, and said, "But, who do you say I am?" As soon as the words fell across his lips Simon answered abruptly, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven."

Peter gave the answer, but it did not come from him! God revealed the answer that would guide Jesus in his journey toward Jerusalem and the Empire of Power.

Jesus had a mission, to build his church

I. The Church Has A Message.

That is the first thing to remember about the church the Master has come to build: it has a message. Unfortunately, the message seems to be lost for most people today. The church is just another cultural expression.

The message of the church is built upon the affirmation that Jesus is Christ. "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." This is the message of the church. When we see Christ, we see God. The church gives us that opportunity.

Last week, I made the statement that God is either the God of all of us or the God of none of us. The message is that our God is the supreme God. God desires to bring all people into that fellowship. We must never forget this.

If Jesus is not the reflection of God, then let's all go home and quit fooling ourselves, for we have nothing to offer the world.

Not long ago I rode by a church which had something on its bulletin board out front which really bothered me. There was no sermon title, worship invitation, or catchy sentence. Instead, there were these words: "Karate Classes Every Tuesday." I thought to myself, "What does that have to do with church? What good would that do a person coming by here looking for hope, help, light, love?" Breaking someone's face with the side of your hand has absolutely nothing to do with the message of the church.

Do you know why the message is so important? Because it is the only answer for the problems we face, and the problems of the world.

II. The Church Has A Master.

That is the second thing we need to know about this church the Master came to build. He is the Master of the church.

Now we all need to make a confession. Whether you want to admit it or not, we all live in a world where others control our destiny. We may want to think that we are independent, self-sufficient people, but we aren't. I'm always amused a people who claim to be so independent, yet they look like everyone else that is claiming the same independence.

God grants us true freedom in freewill and choice. It is a freewill and choice which brings sorrow and sadness at some of our choices, along with joy and happiness.

The master of the church is God. Denominations will come and go and that includes the United Methodist Church. I believe that God will continue to bless his church with power and strength to be his faithful witness in a sinful world.

When Christians take their eyes off of God, they become something other than Christian - and their church becomes something other than a church. When we take our eyes off the Master we begin thinking the church is ours instead of his. We seek our will instead of God's will.

The church has a Master.

III. The Church Has A Mission.

That is the third thing to remember. A church with a message and a Master always has a mission.

The mission of the church isn't to have the largest membership. It isn't to westernize everyone's culture to fit ours. The mission of the church isn't to make everyone like us.

The mission is to spread the message about the revelation of God. This is the same revelation that Peter had long ago when he confessed Jesus as the Christ. The revelation, which does not come from theological study or even guessing, it only comes from God.

Jesus said, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom." He entrusted the disciples with a mission. It means that we can be as bound or as free as we want to be. Many today worship God out of fear or dread of some prophesied future. Some are avoiding life today, to prepare for some future life in heaven.

God seems to be saying to us, you can be as free as you want to be and you can share that same freedom with others. The message is about being in a vital, living relationship with God!

Our mission is to share a message that the world desperately needs to hear. Our task is to help others discover the revelation of God.

God becomes the rock of our lives and guides us. When we allow other things to guide us, we live below our potential.

Using the wrong guide can be disastrous! Probably the most glaring, and much hyped error was made during the development of NASA's Mars Climate Orbiter. In 1999, just before orbital landing, a navigation error sent the satellite into an orbit 100 km lower than its intended 150 km altitude above the planet. This error was caused by one of the most expensive measurement incompatibilities in space exploration history. One of NASA's subcontractors, Lockheed Martin, used English units instead of NASA-specified metric units. This incompatibility in the design units culminated in a huge miscalculation in orbital altitude. The poor orbiter plummeted through the Martian atmosphere and burned up, at the cost of 125 million dollars!

That's why there is so much chaos in our society today. Everyone's using their own guide, instead of God's presence.

For Christians there is such a reference point - and that is our relationship with God.

Jesus the Christ is calling us to be "rock people" - people upon whose faith he can build his church.

Would you be a rock person for Jesus?

In the Name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Resources:

Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, 01-55673-102-7

Taylor, Barbara Brown. The Seeds of Heaven. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

<http://www.universetoday.com/13267/the-mars-curse-why-have-so-many-missions-failed/>

King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com

Please know this is not a word for word manuscript of the preaching event. This is background material and primary thoughts that may or may not be used during the sermon delivery.