

Being the Church
Matthew 16:13-20
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St. Mary the Virgin
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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?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And 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. 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. I 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

For me, the implication of this well-known Gospel text is the question: What does it mean to be the church? Is it enough simply to call oneself the church to be one?

Likewise if we figure out what it means to be a church what is implied about our relationship with the world at large? For instance are we primarily destined to minister to each other and provide pastoral support for our membership and perhaps seek to attract others who would benefit from our pastoral care, or our music, or our Christian Education? In other words are we defined by being a membership organization that cares for its own?

This doesn't seem to me to be the point of today's Gospel.

On the other hand is the church to take positions on the political realities of today and risk thereby taking positions which might alienate some of the faithful? For instance, just thinking about the world today what is or should be the church's position on the controversy over being Woke? Whatever that means; white privilege? Christian Nationalism? The refugee crisis of Central Americans flooding New York? And most polarizing, the next presidential election?

This leads to the question suggested by this morning's Gospel. Since you might've been distracted from the Gospel by my list of political issues, the Gospel today is, among other things, about Peter founding the church. He is the rock upon which the church of Christ is to be built¹. What is the church?

Our word church is from the Greek word *kuriakos*. This is the word the Barbarians who defeated Rome heard when they asked about the large buildings they found in every Roman town. When the Barbarians asked the townspeople who the buildings belonged to they were told *κυριακός*/ *kuriakos* or that is the

¹ If you read or listen to my sermons then you'll remember that I usually understand the name *Peter* to mean that Simon had rocks between his ears.

Lord's house, which corrupted ultimately in English, to church². Thus when we say that we are a church we must be aware that we are talking about the Lord's house, with the Lord being Christ. At its most basic identity a church must belong to Christ. It cannot belong to any organization, corporation, or body of people. We do not own the church in the wider sense of the meaning, we are parts of it, but we do not own it.

The word which appears in this morning's Gospel is not κυριακός/ kuriakos it is ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia. Peter is the rock on which the ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia is formed. It is the root of the Romance Language word for church, for instance in French, *église*. This word is derived from 2 Greek words, καλέω/kaleō which means *to call*, and ἐκ/ek, a preposition meaning *out of* or *from*. To be a part of the ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia is to be called out from the world. To be separate. To be different. This does not conflict with the meaning of church, but enhances it. The word ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia appears in English in the words ecclesial, ecclesiastical, etc. The word is quite different from the word Jesus's Greek speaking Jews might have used³, συναγωγή/sunagōgē, synagogue or gathering place. The focus of ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia is on separation, not gathering. One cannot be part of the ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia and continue life as usual in the world. It is impossible, or it ought to be. If one continues in the world then one is not in the ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia.

Ἐκκλησία/ekklēsia or church, both mean recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord. They mean putting all of one's treasure in that lordship, and not hedging one's bets with the world. It means radically redefining life.

All too often we measure faithfulness by what we do on Sunday morning. In so doing we are standing in direct opposition to what Jesus preaches in the Gospel. Jesus had no intention of founding an institution. He was working to transform the world and to show the world that a different and more fulfilling way to live was possible. He preached the Inbreaking Kingdom of God. It is all about making Christ known in Christ's creation. Making Christ known means making the Prince of Peace known. It means worshiping a savior who disdained power and ministered to the powerless with vulnerability and not force. Jesus avoided power and gave it away whenever it was thrust upon him. He did this knowing that the slippery slope of political power is that it corrupts us from being faithful to the Gospel. If I have political power, then I might lose it, so I rationalize why it's important. I grasp power. I cannot grasp faith⁴.

Peter, who is always wrong as I've pointed out on other occasions, says in our gospel today that Jesus is the Messiah. That is, that Jesus is the anointed one who will free Israel from political bondage. While the portion of the Gospel we

² There is no dispute that the word church derives from the Greek word kuriakos. However, I am unable to find a citation supporting my claim that the barbarians encountered this word. A seminary professor used it in a lecture decades ago, and it's stuck in my memory, so it may or may not be fact, but I like the image.

³ Of course we have no reason to believe Jesus spoke or knew Greek. He probably referred to a synagogue as בית כנסת /beth keneseth, house of assembly or בית תפילה /beth tephilā, house of prayer.

⁴ Read, if you can, the fascinating column in last Sunday's Review Section of the Times: *Why Does Everyone Feel so Insecure all the Time*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/opinion/inequality-insecurity-economic-wealth.html>

read today appears to have Jesus accept the title he will reject it in next Sunday's reading. Jesus is not interested in political power. Jesus is clear that he does not meet the Jewish expectation of a Messiah. He is interested in the transforming power of the Gospel.

So why come to church? Quite simply so we can learn what is important and gain the strength and focus to go out and do it. Jesus was crucified because he made people uncomfortable. In establishing the ekklēsia Jesus meant for us to be uncomfortable and to make others uncomfortable. We are not called to be content. The church is meant to transform the world without being transformed by it.

Being different is a reality of being Christian, not simply of being ordained. We are being different this morning. We could be in bed, or reading the newspaper or playing golf or almost anything else that is a relief from a much too busy life. We could spend the money we pledge on other things. Some who hear me are clear that they could do without opinions, especially political opinions and challenges in a sermon, especially when they don't agree with them. You have chosen to be here or to stream this Mass.

Is the church the building? Or is it the people who worship in the building? Connecticut's former Diocesan Bishop, Ian Douglas, was clear that all too frequently congregations have an Edifice Complex so that for instance if two congregations merge into one building the congregation from the surviving building continues and the congregation from the other building falls away. We observably have a strong, and perhaps too strong, attachment, to our buildings. We have in St. Mary's a beautiful building and it requires a lot of us. But, if our only reason to be here is to maintain the beautiful building then we have lost the faith. We have lost our message. This morning I want to give you a different way of thinking about the meaning of faith and faithfulness.⁵

So hold that thought as I make a few comments that may seem discontinuous but I hope will get us back to the point with new understanding.

By the grace of God and the fellowship of AA I have been sober 28 years today. That means I've been sober for more than half of the years I've been ordained and more than 1/3 of my life. Sobriety is the greatest gift I have ever been given and if you're wondering about AA, I am here to tell you that it can change your life and help you understand what faith is all about⁶. All other gifts, my marriage, my relationship with my children and grandchildren and my work in the church derive from sobriety. It makes them possible.

First some caveats. AA is not Christianity. It is spiritual but includes all seekers. Secondly no one can speak for AA, so I am only sharing with you my experience strength and hope. Because of what I did leading a nonprofit in Westport, I was a public figure in Westport, Wilton and Weston and also because I am a priest and quite apart from my day job was in the public eye weekly, I never enjoyed anonymity. I've been sober long enough that people might've

⁵ It is important for all of us to learn from the lived reality of churches that are closing. Most recently, also in last Sunday's paper, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/realestate/mother-ame-zion-church-harlem-nyc.html>. The building was designed for a Sunday attendance of 1,000. Today a couple of dozen attend.

⁶ I have agreed to talk about AA spirituality in Adult Ed on the last Sunday in October.

forgotten that I am an alcoholic but I haven't. I still go to meetings, four a week. My bishops know I'm in recovery and I am from time-to-time a resource to them when they encounter a priest in need of sobriety. The clergy in Westport all know I'm in recovery and they call on me from time-to-time to help with parishioners or congregants who need sobriety or to help them deal with an active alcoholic or drug user.

I mention this because the church can learn two things from AA and both are important. The first is that AA is a program of Attraction. We do not recruit members to AA. People are attracted because they want what we have. It is a deeply spiritual and life changing program. People who are in the throes of addiction want freedom from that which binds them in a hopeless life. The second is that in AA we only ever talk about what's important. We spend no time focusing on the trivial or mundane. We do not worry about, in meetings, all of the minutia that can consume a parish. We meet to get people sober. The other issues are important but not why anyone joins and if we focus on the other distractions we'll lose our commitment to sobriety.

To return to the point, the gospel and our worship here is intended to transform us so that those who encounter us will wish that they had the hope and love we exhibit. In other words, the way we live should Attract them. We get that by focusing, in worship, on that which is really important, being equipped to go out into the world and make the saving message of Christ Jesus known. As to the second point, I believe that as the church is losing members we have the opportunity to focus solely on what's important. That is on preaching the saving word of the Gospel every time we gather. The saving word has implications and they must be drawn out, but it is the saving word that a people in spiritual crisis, our fellow citizens, are in desperate need to hear.

I maintain that any hope a church has of being a vital congregation will depend upon showing that the church is crucial to our understanding of who we are. A priest can help us and guide us but ultimately it is up to us. Very few people join a church because of the priest; they join because they want what we have. I hope we will demand of all priests that in that person's preaching and teaching they only talk about important matters. While it might be important to understand the Golden Rule, or that Jesus Loves Me This I Know, a priest must go beyond this and help us understand how our faith forms who we are as persons, our role in our family and our role in our community⁷. That means talking with us about the real issues we face. These issues include political issues.

I am obsessed with politics and power. I watched most of the Republican candidates' debate Wednesday evening. If we are as Christians evaluating how a candidate's position conforms to our faith then being part of the ekklesia, being called out, means that we look at how the candidate's positions reflect the gospel. So are the poor at the forefront of the message? Is prosperity for all the ground of the message? You can answer these questions for yourself. Above all are the

⁷ An article this week in the Washington Post is apropos. The writer laments life without the church community he grew up with. He feels let down by the expressions of church he's encountered. I believe that much of his disappointment is rooted in the church of his youth failing to educate him in what a maturing faith is: <https://wapo.st/47EP6qu>

positions strengthening hope or focused on fear? The gospel is endlessly hopeful and we are told not to be afraid.

Neither party is the church. Both parties, and third parties are about power and the effective use of it. That's reality. But the Christian response, always an outsider response no matter who is in office, is that the poor must come first. We are called to be faithful and we judge actions not words. We are by definition outside but we live in this political system so we are called to act as the servants of the vulnerable, crucified, prince of peace.

We fail the world if we act as a part of the world seeking political power rather than live as a people who go out and do the Gospel. We critique political power not to gain it for ourselves but to call others into the work of caring for the vulnerable. If we give away that which makes us unique, and become a secret club, or if we become like some Episcopal churches have, museums for the way we were, then we have abandoned our call and have ceased to be the church. We are then just an organization.

It's hard being different. It is hard to not seek political power. If we don't admit that we too are different then we can't minister to the world and the family we are set in. Our being here is, I hope, a sign that we want to find out how to use our being different to transform the world, rather than our desire to be comfortable in the world as it is.