

# The Enduring Church

## Matthew 16:13–18 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” **17** 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. **18** 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.

**Introduction.** This morning 864 United Methodist delegates from around world gathered in St. Louis, MO to address and hopefully resolve issues with which we have wrestled for 47 years regarding human sexuality. They will debate how we will be organized even though we do not all believe the same regarding some matters related to whether we conduct same sex marriage and whether practicing homosexuals are allowed to be ordained and pastor congregations.

Most people in the “know” sense the decisions will have a significant impact on our tribe called United Methodist. These matters present a legitimate threat to our denomination. Whether you are a long-time UM or this is first time in a UM church, you need to know this is potentially a watershed moment for us. We can even ask, “Will there be a United Methodist Church in the future?” Many will be asking, “Will I be a United Methodist in the future?”

This morning we need to hear a voice of good news – a message where we can find comfort and hope for what lies ahead.

The hope for which I long is found in the words of Jesus which stood the test for nearly 2,000 years. I invite you to hear these words anew.

### The Retreat

Jesus and his merry band, had traveled to a picturesque setting of Caesarea Philippi which was located at the foot of Mt. Hermon. There in this lush green environment was a beautiful spring that gushed forth creating a Garden of Eden type environment. During their time there, Jesus struck up a conversation which sounded rather benign in its beginning - “Who do people say the “son of man” is?

This title was one Jesus often used of himself. It would be as if I would say to in staff meeting on Tuesday, “What are the folks here saying about the “bald-headed preacher?”

This retreat came at a time toward the latter part of Jesus’ public ministry. So lot of people have had encounters with Jesus and public opinions were being shared broadly. He had become a well-known person and celebrity. His stories had spread far and wide in Israel. So Jesus was interested in what the disciples had been hearing.

So the popcorn answers that came up from the group probably caused Jesus to raise his eyebrows and perhaps chuckle – Some say you are “Elijah.” “John the Baptist.” “Jeremiah” or another prophet. The common theme was the people believe Jesus was on some mission from God.

### **The Question.**

Then Jesus turned the question toward the group. He made it very personal making it longer what are you hearing but what do you think. “Who do you say that I am?” These disciples had been with Jesus for a couple of years and had an intimate knowledge of their rabbi. They had witnessed his life, his ministry and heard his words. They had a relationship with him. “Who do you say that I am?”

Peter responded, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of living God.*” Peter’s words go as deep as it is possible to go with the identity of Jesus. He is the One God had promised would come to usher in a new reality where justice would flow like a mighty river, where God’s desires would be written in the human heart, where peace and joy would be the air people breathed, where sins were forgiven, God’s righteousness prevailed and where the low would be lifted up and exalted humbled. Listen to the description in Isaiah:

*So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic. 17 I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line (28:16–17a).*

Not only was Jesus this One who was promised, but Peter knew Jesus had a unique relationship with God. He was a special human with status and power who would accomplish God’s plan, he was the very Son of God. Literally we could take months in Sunday sermons unraveling what all Peter’s confession meant.

Jesus thought, “*Wonderful. Peter you finally understand. But you did not come up with this alone. This has been revealed to you by God.*” Peter confession made him the first to fully recognize who Jesus was – the Messiah, the Son of God.

### **Built on the Rock.**

What Jesus said next took the discussion to a new level. He said to Peter – “you are Peter” – which for us would be “Rocky.” Jesus nicknamed this man, whose given name was Simon, “Peter.” You are “Peter,” I am the “Messiah,” “Son of God.”

Then Jesus said, *Upon this rock* (Peter is Πέτρος and rock is πέτρα) *I will build my church* – this assembly of people I have called out from this world to follow me.

Jesus knew something about building because he was the son of a carpenter and had been mentored in the trade by his father. Like any builder, he knew the most important ingredient in a building was not the color of paint or type of flooring. The most important part was the foundation. In the Sermon on the Mount, he reminded his audience of the importance of a foundation - He said those *who heard and acted on his words were like the one who builds the house on the rock. When the storms came and the winds blew the house remained strong. The rock gives the house an enduring foundation.*

New York City has some of the most magnificent and tallest buildings in the world. Building that tower into the sky have tremendous weight. One of the reasons these building have been built in New York is beneath the soil of sand and gravel is a hard stable rock formation called schist. Those buildings rest on the rock.

Jesus made it clear he was the master builder of his “church.” As we hear this, it immediately speaks to something that may be a surprise to most people - the church is Jesus’ invention, not that of his followers. Jesus builds his church. It is not the creation of religious

people, an evolution of a religious organization or a result of holy conferencing. Jesus builds his church. He places it upon a solid foundation that enables the church to endure.

As people, we often build things related to the church and Christ. We build different types of structures - some of which are good, beneficial and are long lived. For example, the UM structure consists of conferences, districts, circuits and local churches. Our local church has different types of administrative and ministry structures. The circles on your bulletin tells something of the ministry structure here at OUMC.

As people we build theological systems - Calvinism, Arminianism, Kingdom Theology, Liberation Theology, etc. We seek to find ways to understand scripture and our faith and how to live it out.

We build communities where we live in relationship with others who are seeking and growing in Christ. We are in the process of building community here.

Structures, theologies and even communities have a life cycle. They live for a season. But it is Jesus who builds his Church which is enduring.

### **The gates of hades.**

Jesus adds an image that speaks to how enduring his church will be - the "*gates of hades*" will not overwhelm it. Most of us can create images in our mind of what that means. We know this is a significant statement about the strength and durability of Jesus' church. I invite you to listen for a moment to a few thoughts that will make this come alive.

"Hades" here is not the equivalent of what we call "hell," the place of eternal punishment. Hades was the place of the dead, what the OT called "Sheol." It was the place the souls of the dead would reside awaiting the resurrection in the last days. In a few places such as Psalm 9, it is called the "gates of death" - 13: "*Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death.*"

What pursues every human being? What stalker can you not escape? **Death**. If Jesus tarries, each of us will go through the gate of death. The author of Hebrews wrote: "*It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment*" (9:27). Not only does death pursue human beings, it pursues human institutions and organizations. Those who study these speak of how each has a life cycle meaning it will at some point cease to be. Now keep these thoughts in mind.

Jesus said he **was building an assembly that the gates of death could not conquer**. The church he built would not be subject to humans' greatest predator. Death would have no power over Christ's church.

The life of Jesus **places a very important twist on the gates of Hades**. It is at the heart of our understanding of our Christian faith. We confessed it in our creeds – Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. He was placed into the place of death. Sheol claimed another soul as Jesus entered the place of the dead as hades' gates closed behind him. BUT those gates could not hold him. Three days later he came forth from death and was risen to new life (Ephesians 4:9; 1 Peter 3:18ff; Psalm 16:8). He forever changed those gates for his followers because he promised that bars would not hold them there forever as well.

There is a third aspect of Jesus' words is especially pertinent to our present situation as United Methodists. A word closely associated with Hades is the NT word, **abyss**. It is typically associated with the realm of the dead for the disobedient. It is the place of demons and evil. From the abyss spring these things (Luke 8:31; Revelation 9:1ff; 20:1ff).

**The forces of evil have since the birth of the church sought to destroy her**. In Acts we saw how persecution arose and took the life of many of her saints. Throughout her history, even into the present time persecution has sought to silence her. Even now, many believers and churches in India are facing prejudice, violence and even death. Yet the church has remained.

Sometimes those forces have infiltrated the hearts and minds of those within the Church and threaten through division and schism. In the early church, a battle raged between Jewish believers and Gentile believers regarding whether believers had to obey the Torah. Peter and Barnabas argued over whether John Mark could accompany them on a second missionary journey because he had abandoned them on the first. They went their separate ways. In the first few centuries, great discussions were had and schisms occurred over the nature of Jesus. About a thousand years ago, a major schism between the Eastern Church (Orthodox) and Western church (Roman Catholic) happened as it was fueled by political differences, ecclesiastical disagreements and over from whence comes the Holy Spirit – from both the Father and Son or only the Father. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Methodist Church in America split over the issue of slavery. These are but a few of the many divisions and schisms. We can add to this acts of harm perpetrated by leaders, harmful words and acts of stupidity.

How has the church survived the onslaught of attack from external forces and internal forces? Yet the Church of Jesus Christ is alive today. Jesus has built it upon the Rock.

### The Rock.

So we are left with this fundamental and all important question: *What/who is the Rock?* The Rock is the foundation upon which the Jesus builds is anchored.

Let's look multiple dimension painting of this rock?

Peter (Rocky) made this all *important confession about Jesus' identity* – He is the Messiah, God's son. There was and is no other like Jesus. This confession is an important dimension of the Rock.

Peter in his *confession was acknowledging his faith in Jesus*. He had entered into a dynamic and life altering relationship with Jesus, who was the Messiah, Son of God. It was out of this relationship, the revelation of who Jesus was had come.

Peter was the first to make this *confession of Jesus and became one who was built into the foundation*. He became the first member of this new community Jesus was building. He was one of the apostles built into the foundation. Listen to Paul's description of this: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone* (Ephesians 2:19-20).

St. Augustine claimed this rock upon which *Jesus builds his church is Jesus, himself*. I agree with Augustine that Jesus is the rock. Paul wrote that *the foundation is Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 3:11).

*The true Church that Jesus is building is anchored in Him, the Messiah, Son of God*. It is our confession and faith in him that ties us to this new community he had created. As we remain in him, we are part of this enduring church. Jesus is the church's sure foundation.

Local churches are often built on things that are not enduring – the personality and charisma of a leader, a particular ministry, a style of worship, a particular theological doctrine, a stand on a social issue or a given relationship to a tribe. Unfortunately, these are not enduring. Leaders move on, styles change, ministry needs change, social concerns change and denominations do not remain the same.

*But the Rock of Jesus Christ remain constant and true*. As a church, my hope is we will remain anchored in Jesus Christ through all the storm before us. We will look to and trust in him as our tribe deals with the matters before us. We may not all agree over all the matters and decisions but in Christ we can remain strong and a faithful witness to his love in this community and to the world.