

**Matthew 16:13-20 | You are the Christ**

**August 23,**

**2020**

Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

***INTRO***

Well, you may have heard the old Sunday School mantra that the church is not the building, but the people are — and that’s certainly true. In fact, we’re having that truth reinforced this year more than ever, as we’ve had to stop meeting together in our church building on Sunday mornings for worship. But even though we know that the church is the people — the community of believers — we sometimes forget this. We often use language that even subconsciously leads us to believe that the church is a building. In fact, we call our building *a church*. We say, “I’m going to church”, meaning 5712-48th Ave. And lately we’ve been asking, “When will church re-open?” meaning of course our building, and our corporate worship in our building.

Now, while our doors have been closed, does this mean though that the church has ceased to exist? Of course not! No, the church is something other than just a building. This is a season in which many church communities are asking the question of how we “do” or “be” the church in our current circumstances.

What makes the church the church? When what we’re used to has been taken away from us, what does it mean to be the church? Are we still the church when we’re not meeting together in a nice sanctuary on a Sunday morning? Are we still the church when we’re not worshipping together regularly? Are we still the church when we’re not following the liturgy, or our normal order of service? Are we still the church when we’re not having Lunch Sundays, or singing “Happy Birthday” to each other every week? Is church attendance a fair metric for measuring faith or maturity? These are important questions for us.

Now, in Matthew 16, Jesus gives us a two-part answer to that question — the question of what makes the church the church. Today we'll look at the first part of Jesus' answer, and next Sunday we'll look at the 2nd part of Jesus' answer. So, you can think of this as a mini sermon series — on what makes the church. It's an important question especially considering that over the last 5 months much of what we consider normal & even a central part of the church has been taken away from us. And surprisingly, both parts to the answer to this question are very personal — they're not answers about how to organize an institution — they're answers that are directed right at us.

### ***THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY***

Have you ever noticed that there are places throughout the world that are swollen with significance, history, & meaning? Gettysburg, PA for example is an important place for Americans. Pier 21 in Halifax, where one million immigrants entered Canada throughout the 20th century isn't just another place, but is full of meaning & significance for many people, and for our country. Some places have a lot of significance packed into them. And here in our lesson today, Jesus takes his disciples to a city called Caesarea Philippi to have a conversation with them. And I believe that this was no coincidence, because Caesarea Philippi was a place of significance too.

The city was built on the northern border of Israel, and it was a Roman hub in the midst of a semitic region that was very foreign in its ways to the Romans. For the Romans, Caesarea Philippi was like an oasis in the middle of a province full of strange beliefs, customs, & languages, and the city was filled with temples & shrines dedicated to the vast plurality of Roman deities to remind its inhabitants of home. The foremost deity of the city was the god Pan, who was a kind of faun — a half goat, half human — within Greek mythology. In fact the city was later named Panias after Pan, and today the region is known as Banias.

There was a plurality of religious devotion within the city, and to underline this even more, the word “pan” in Greek means “all”. In English the word *Pandemic* comes from Greek: *pan* (“all”) + *demos* (“people”), so a pandemic is a illness that reaches all people. And the god Pan signified among other things the whole canopy of Greek gods. In other words, Caesarea Philippi was “Diversity Land”, where you could pick & choose any of the gods to worship & present offerings to.

Do you think there might be some parallels to our modern, world today? You bet! Our society today prides itself on tolerance & diversity, including providing freedom for religious observance & spirituality of all sorts. There’s similarities here. It’s significant that Jesus travelled to Caesarea Philippi of all places to ask these questions of his disciples — “Who do people say that I am?” and, “Who do you say I am?” He wants himself to be considered in light of all religious & spiritual options of the day.

### ***PETER’S CONFESSION***

What do people think of Jesus today? What do the folks you know think of him? The disciples explained that most people thought Jesus was one of the prophets — a gifted & wise ethical teacher perhaps. But Peter affirmed that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (vs. 16).

*“And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.’” —vs. 17*

In a city where people could pick & choose who to worship, Jesus pushed the issue with his disciples, leading them to the point where they affirmed that Jesus is the Son of God, the Anointed One sent to save the world. It was a counter-intuitive & provocative affirmation then just as it is now.

So here’s the first part of the answer to our question, “What is the church?” It’s not a building, but a community of people who have made that very confession — that Jesus

is our Saviour. It's something very personal — not an institution, but something that each and every one of us has to come to terms with one way or the other.

We can spend a lifetime attending services in a church building without ever dealing with this question, “Who do you say that I am?” We might even assume that going to church makes us a Christian, but it doesn't. It's a confession of faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour that makes one a Christian, and if you've never honestly dealt with that question, I'd urge you to do so now. You might be unsure about Jesus — that's fine, but take the time to pursue, to seek, to weigh the person of Jesus & the Bible's claims about him. Ask questions, seek answers, pray & ask Jesus to reveal himself to you — to reveal the truth.

### ***SPIRITUAL, OR RELIGIOUS?***

There's a common refrain that is echoed today by many people saying that they are “spiritual but not religious.” Usually I think that this means that people aren't outright atheists, but don't want to be restrained by a religious system, or boxed in to a field of belief. We all have appetites. Think of our appetite for food and nourishment — that's because we need food to survive, to grow, to thrive as human beings. To acknowledge that we are spiritual is a good thing — it's like acknowledging that we have appetites for spiritual things, just like we do for food and water. But if you don't ever sit down at a table to eat, you'll go on being hungry the rest of your life.

We can acknowledge our spiritual appetites, but if we don't sit down at table and commit to eating we'll starve — if we don't commit to a religious system, our spiritual appetites will starve. It's my experience & my firm belief that if we sit down at Jesus' table though, we will find his food to nourish us unlike anything else — we'll find in fact that submission to Jesus' Way isn't restrictive, but liberating. Going to church doesn't make us Christians or followers of Jesus, but faith in him — being able to say & actually saying, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

## **CHURCH AS COMMUNITY**

Let me mention just one more implication of this passage. When Peter makes his confession of who Jesus is, Jesus affirms him saying,

*“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” —vs. 18*

He says, “on this rock I will build by church” not, *churches*. There’s only one church, & we’re all a part of it so long as we are confessing Jesus as the Saviour of the world, & our Saviour too.

There’s a cheesy joke about this — there was a man named Jeff who died & went to heaven & was met by St. Peter at the pearly gates. St. Peter lets him in, and shows him around heaven. There’s streets of gold, angels with harps, people worshipping God, all of that stuff. They begin to pass a number of rooms — in one are a group of Roman Catholics, in another are a group of Baptists, in another Presbyterians. And when they pass another room, St. Peter turns to Jeff and says, “Shhh — quiet as we pass this room.” And Jeff asks, “Why, who’s in that room?” And St. Peter says, “Oh, that’s the Lutherans — they think they’re the only ones here...” I didn’t say it was a good joke...

Jesus promises to build his church. But he’s not out to create a group of churches, despite the fact that we’ve formed different traditions over the centuries. And the church that Jesus has built is a community.

Paul writes in our NT lesson that Jesus’ church is a body made up of many members, each of which has different gifts & things to bring to the table. That’s true denominationally, but it’s also true individually. To be a Christian implies belonging to a community — we can’t live out our faith in isolation from one another. We need each other, & we are made to support & serve one another. Now, this is really difficult for us because individualism is imbedded in the fabric of our culture. To be a person of faith means shedding our individualism, it means living in community, loving & serving people

you might normally not want anything to do with. It means putting others before yourself.

This is especially important for us in a time when we are forced into isolation. If you're an introvert like me, you might not mind the excuse to be left alone — but isolation from one another isn't God's design for us, nor is it good. These are the challenges that we are facing right now. We live in Caesarea Philippi — in the country of the Greek god Pan — a world that affirms a diversity of belief & practice. And we need each other if we aren't going to have our faith snuffed out in such a world.

As we live into the reality of being the church, we'll be ushered into a life of joy — a life of following Jesus & of experiencing the excitement & the growth of our true selves — finally fulfilling our spiritual appetites. And Jesus promises that not even the gates of Hell will be able to hold us back as his people — those who stand on the confession that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Amen.