

Matthew 16:13-20

Only twice in the entire New Testament do we see the word *church*. The first time we see it is right here in our text. The second is two chapters later. “*On this rock,*” says Jesus, “*I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” What is the church? In the Greek it’s the word *ecclesia*, which means “called out.” Those in the church are called out of the world, just as God’s people, under Moses, were called out of Egypt. The church is not a building, and yet it is built. It is not a structure, and yet it has structure. The church is people; people who may have very little in common, and yet they are united as one body.

Some argue that the church is built on the man, Simon Peter; that he is the *rock*. But then the church is no different from every cult and false religion in the world - churches that are built on mere men and the ideas of men. This church and congregation is not built upon Simon Peter, nor on Martin Luther, nor, God forbid, on Pastor Bell. We may sing *This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land*, but what is true of America is not true of the church. It’s not your church or my church; it’s Jesus’ church. His words are clear: “*I will build My church.*”

In the 1989 movie, *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner played the role of an Iowa farmer who was told, “If you build it, they will come.” So he did...a baseball field on his farm, and sure enough, they came; players from the 1919 Chicago White Sox. This is not how Jesus builds His church; hoping that *they* (whoever *they* is) will come if He builds it. You and I can physically come and enter into the church building, but we are not able to come into Jesus’ church. In fact, we want no part of His church...our flesh, that is. It would be easier, says Jesus, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for anyone of us to enter in to His church. No wonder He says *No one can come to Me unless the Father draws him*.

There is a sharp distinction between those who are in the church and everyone else. Jesus draws this distinction in our text. “*Who do people say (I) am?*” He asks His disciples. All sorts of answers are given: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. The same is true today. Ask one hundred people in a shopping mall, “Who is Jesus?” and you will receive various answers. “A good man,” “A prophet,” “Someone I should imitate,” and so forth. But all such answers Jesus brushes aside with His question, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Peter’s answer is the only one that is acceptable, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*” Any answer less than that is the mark of someone outside the church. But to reply with Peter’s answer is the mark of those who are called out of the world and drawn by the heavenly Father into Jesus’ church.

What do you say about Jesus? Who is He? What is He to you? Any answer from within yourself falls short. Only the heavenly Father is able to reveal to you the truth of Jesus as the Christ. Is this what you believe about Jesus...that He is the Son of the living God? Then God has worked this faith in you. He has pulled you through the eye of the needle and drawn you into Jesus’ church. You live in the world, but you are not of the world. You have been called out of the world into the family of believers.

Thank God for your baptism, for on that day you gave Peter’s answer. To mere babes, infants, the heavenly Father reveals Jesus. He grants them faith to confess that Jesus is the Christ. And what you confessed at your baptism is what we, as the church, confess day by day, and week after week.

So is this where it ends? Can I stop here, give you all a pat on the back, and say, “Off you go. You’ve made it! You’ve arrived. You’re in!” If only I could. But we know better. For the answer we give with our mouth is not always the answer we give with our life. The tongue in our shoe talks a different talk than does the tongue in our mouth. Every Sunday we give Peter’s confession here in church, but Monday through Saturday our words and actions often give a different confession. Out there we can act as if we hardly know who Jesus is. Out there we can act as if He is not that important to us. We can act as if Jesus is not the Son of the living God, as we say, but a god who is more or less sleeping, if He is alive.

But how is it possible to give two different answers to the same question? How is it possible to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, in here with other church members, but out there with friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, to confess something entirely different about Jesus? Even Peter did this. Here in our text he confesses Christ, but in the court of Caiaphas he denied that he ever knew Him.

“The gates of hell,” says Jesus, *“shall not prevail against (His church).”* But they seem to prevail against me; to stop me from confessing Jesus with my daily life. This leaves me with doubts and concerns. Am I really in Jesus’ church? I say all the right words with my mouth in here, but my actions are always falling short. Woe is me. Wretched man that I am!

Friend, Jesus builds His church with sinful people; people who are weak; who fall so easily into temptation. Jesus builds His church with people He has called out of the world, but who act like the Israelites under Moses. As they wanted to go back to Egypt, so we in Jesus’ church have the desire to go back and be of the world again.

The church may well be the most rickety structure on the face of the earth. But it stands. It will not fall. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And for one reason: the church is built on Christ the solid Rock. And He lives and breathes forgiveness.

He gives the keys to heaven to His apostles, to His pastors, to His church, for the purpose of rebuking proud sinners so that they repent, but especially for opening heaven to those who repent by forgiving them.

You are a member of Jesus’ church, and so am I, not because He needs us; not because we’re such strong, faithful people, but by grace. It’s because He keeps forgiving us when we fail. He keeps uplifting us when we fall. Jesus is the rock, not us. We’re marshmallows, if that. The gates of hell would easily suck us in. But Jesus is your rock. He is your strength. When you confess Him as the Lord of your life, this is Him at work in you. And when you fail to confess Him by how you live, He is merciful and forgives you.

The gates of hell could not prevail against Jesus. They tried. He was put to death on a cross. He was buried in a tomb. But Jesus prevailed. He burst forth from the dead on the third day. No one else has done this, or could do this. Only the Son of the living God. This is why He is the rock upon which His church is built. This is why hell itself cannot prevail over you; not when you stand in your baptismal waters upon Jesus.

The church lives by breathing in the air of forgiveness. This is why the Sacrament is here for you so often. This is forgiveness. This is Jesus for you. When the gates of hell are after you and trying to pull you in, here is your place of refuge. Here is your rock upon which you stand.

“I will build My church,” Jesus says. He builds it by forgiving sinners; sinners like us. He builds it through Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Holy Absolution. When these holy things are in your life, and your life is lived in them, you are wrapped in Jesus’ holy wounds for you. Then you are in Jesus’ church, and you know that the gates of hell shall not prevail against you. Amen.