

## ***the Church, gathered***

Matthew 16:13-20 (1 Peter 2:4-12)

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In the verses just preceding our passage from Matthew, Jesus told his disciples to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The disciples were confused by that, at first, they thought Jesus was talking about bread. But they soon figured it out. Those Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders of that day. They differed in what they emphasized, but they agreed on this one thing: Jesus still had to prove himself to them.

So they asked him for a sign from heaven. Keep in mind, that Jesus had just healed numerous people and had fed thousands with seven loaves of bread. But that wasn't enough. They needed more, because their desire for biblical seriousness and cultural relevance had made it so they no longer recognized The One who was right in their midst. "Prove it to us, Jesus," they are saying, "prove it to us that you are who everyone says you are."

After Jesus left them and went with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, it seems like he still has this encounter with the Pharisees on his mind. Matthew 16, verses 13-20, reading from the Common English Bible.

*Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Human One is?"*

*They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."*

*He said, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?"*

*Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

*Then Jesus replied, "Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. I tell you that you are Peter. And I'll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won't be able to stand against it. I'll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven." Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ.*

Our second scripture comes from the first letter attributed to Peter. It appears that the letter was written to Gentile Christians who were being. For our purposes, it's important to remember that one of the author's reasons for writing this letter was to strengthen Christians in times of distress; to help them see their lives as enfolded within God's purposes. 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 4 to 12.

*As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says:*

*"See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,*

*and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”*

*Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,*

*“The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”*

*and,*

*“A stone that causes people to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

*They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.*

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

*Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

And what about you, Jesus said, “who do you say that I am?”

And what about us, who do we say that Jesus is?

Simon said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Note what Peter does not say.

He does not say, “I think you are the Christ, but that’s my truth. Others may have a different truth” (as if his conviction was simply an opinion).

He also does not say, “For us, you are the Christ, but there may be other Christs”, as if Jesus was the Messiah only for his followers. No, Peter says, “You are the Christ”, the Son of the Living God. I emphasize “the” here, because, in original text, all of these words are emphasized in a way that we lose if we simply read them in English.

It’s here that Jesus gives Peter a new name, The Rock, and says, “Upon this very rock, I will build my church”. Now, this has been among the most discussed and disputed verses in Matthew. Roman Catholics have long believed that when Jesus said that he will build his church upon “this rock”, he is referring to Peter and his office here, along with the office of Peter’s successors. Protestants and the Eastern Orthodox Church, however, say that Jesus is honoring Peter’s faith and confession here (and so the faith of everyone who succeeds Peter in making this same confession of Jesus). But I wonder whether such a sharp distinction needs to be made. It’s the particular Peter who has made the particular confession that Christ builds his church.

“You are The Christ, the Son of the Living God”. Disciples who modestly, tirelessly, faithfully point to Jesus are disciples and communities that Jesus honors by using them to build up his church. Christ-centeredness, is the key to church building, because Jesus does the building, not us. If we veer far from the church’s foundational confession of Christ, we’re left with the equivalent of a zombie church, a church that looks like a church, talks like a church, maybe does some things like a church, but really is The Walking Dead, because it has had its identity -- the very thing that gave it life -- removed.

“Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and see all the people. “As a child, I was taught the simple rhyme with the accompanying motions.

I said those words, I learned those motions. And now I wonder, why was I taught such heresy? I’m joking here. Half joking. But the truth is, we all are tempted to substitute something else for the life of discipleship.

Sunday morning gatherings simply cannot replace what it means to be the church. We don’t go to church, whether it’s the building or Sunday morning worship.

No, the church is a community of disciples who have been gathered by Jesus to model the love of God to the world. And they do that by how they love one another and share life together. The church is a community of disciples who have been gathered by Jesus to model the love of God to the world. And they do that by how they love one another and share life together. We grow into maturity through the discipline of being a part of a community and being accountable to it.

Yes, I long for the day when we can be all together in one place. But we can never separate church from Jesus or the church from the people.

That rhyme that I was taught as a child? Maybe we should revise it like this: “Here is the building. Here is the people. Open the doors, and here is the church, which is the community of disciples who model the love of God to the world by how they love one another and share life together.”

It’s less catchy, I know. But, in the name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it’s true.

*And so, as we come to Jesus, the living Stone, we also like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

*Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.*