

“THE CHURCH WILL NEVER DIE”

Matthew 16:13-20

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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During a visit to Israel nine years ago, I spent several days in the northern region of the country which is called Galilee. Galilee is a common destination for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land because it was in Nazareth of Galilee that Jesus spent his boyhood, and it was in the region of Galilee where Jesus conducted most of his public ministry.

One of the places I visited in Galilee was the town of Caesarea Philippi, which is mentioned in today's Gospel reading. Caesarea Philippi is located twenty miles north of the Sea of Galilee on the slopes of Mount Hermon. The town was originally known as Paneas because the ancient Greek god Pan was once worshipped there. By Jesus' time the area was under the jurisdiction of Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great. Philip renamed the place for the current Caesar, and it became known as Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the other Caesarea that Herod had built on the Mediterranean Sea.

All that remains of Caesarea Philippi today are the ruins of ancient Greek temples, but those ruins echo with one of the most famous confessions of faith in the annals of Christianity. It is here that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 13:15-16). Jesus responds by blessing Peter and telling him that his understanding of Jesus' identity has been revealed to him by God. Then Jesus continues, “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” (vv. 18-19).

You're well aware that these verses have been a hotbed of controversy for hundreds of years. Scholars have often argued about the “rock” upon which Jesus promises to build his Church. Roman Catholics have insisted that Peter himself is the rock and that Peter is therefore the authoritative teacher in early Christianity. Protestants have often claimed that Peter's confession is the foundation of the Christian community, rather than Peter the person.

However, this debate misses the real point of the passage. Here we have Jesus' promise of a Church that will be his and that will not be overcome even by death itself. Though it faces fierce challenges from within and without, the Church will always endure to the end of history. The Church may have setbacks along the way and give the appearance of being terminally ill, but the Church will never die.

For a long time, critics have been castigating the Christian Church, wishing it would just go away, and even sounding its death knell. Ever since the Church ceased to be a little network of Christian communities struggling for survival in the Roman Empire and became a formidable institution in the Western world, it has been the target of attack by wits, cynics, and moralists in every generation. If these attacks are not so vicious and prominent in our day and our part of the world, the reason is probably that few people now think of the Church as a very powerful or influential institution. “How many [army] divisions has the Pope?” asked Joseph Stalin, voicing

the contempt of the mighty for the militarily powerless. Some of you will remember the signature line in the old TV commercial for a stock brokerage firm: “When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen.” Well, today, when the Church talks, people largely tune out. The Church is in much more danger of being ignored than being attacked. In recent years, for instance, the press has given little space to church news beyond the stereotypes of liberal-conservative controversy or local trivialities. Critics seldom bother to condemn an institution that seems to be relatively powerless in our secular society.

Yet, beneath the surface, the rumbling and grumbling go on. Each new generation thinks it has discovered for the first time a yawning gap between Jesus and the Church that bears his name. From what is being said today I get the impression that it is the organizational aspect of the Church that gives the most offense. It’s no longer possible to denounce the Church for its conspicuous wealth or arrogance or to complain that it wields a crushing power over the habits and pleasures of the whole population. But the image of the Church as an organization remains, a kind of religious corporation much more occupied with ecclesiastical machinery than with the life of the spirit. There is intense religious fervor in our day, manifesting itself in the search for vivid spiritual experience, the interest in meditation and mysticism, the enthusiasm for prophetic figures, and the quest for the esoteric and the occult. But this fervor has not led to a stampede into the established churches or a growth in their membership. It seems to be taken for granted that the real religious action is not in Christian congregations.

Even among those who are not caught up in these forms of excitement, there is a strong resistance to the claims of the Church. Many people make a clear distinction between personal religious conviction and membership in a local church. I sometimes meet the wedding guest who confides to me at the reception something like this: “I liked your service today. You know, I’m not much of a churchgoer, but I believe in God and try to do the right thing. That’s what matters, isn’t it?” Behind this sort of remark, I hear the Church being brushed aside as an optional activity for Christians who happen to like getting mixed up in its activities. Some people feel strongly that membership in a church would add nothing to their religious experience, and would, in fact, involve the hypocrisy of pretending to believe much more than they really do. Some people are just allergic to joining anything these days and particularly resent the idea of linking their religion to some particular denomination.

Put all of this together, and one comes up with the picture of a Church that is becoming increasingly irrelevant and unattractive. This may also help to explain why in some places the Church actually appears to be dying. Membership is dwindling; local congregations are consolidating or closing. Here in the northeast United States, any Christian who doesn’t feel concern about the future of the institutional Church is not in touch with reality.

This reality has become even starker since the global pandemic broke out six months ago. When churches were forced to close their doors, they lost the ingredient in their common life that is most meaningful to their members and most inviting to outsiders – the element of togetherness, belonging, and fellowship. Now churches wonder if they will ever be fully gathered again, or if their old sense of community will ever be the same. I’ve read or heard speculation that many congregations, just like many businesses, will never recover from the pandemic – especially those that were small and fragile to begin with. In some eyes, COVID-19 is the final nail in the coffin for the institutional Church.

I beg to disagree. This morning I want to express in no uncertain terms my belief that the Church of Jesus Christ has a future – a healthy and promising future. Structures may change; forms of worship may be altered; participation may shrink in certain areas of the world. And yet, over against its critics and in the face of discouraging circumstances and statistics, I believe that the Church still has a mission and still has the vitality to accomplish that mission.

I believe the Church has a future, first, on biblical grounds. When you and I feel down in the dumps about the Church's dwindling size and influence, we need to return to Caesarea Philippi and hear again the words of Jesus. The Church has a future because it is first and foremost Christ's Church. Christ promises to build his Church despite the forces of death arrayed against it, and he will keep building until the Church on earth becomes the Church in heaven. We have his assurance that the Church will never die.

I believe the Church has a future also because it is central to God's permanent design for the Christian life. As I read the Bible, I find that from the very beginning Christians found themselves part of a community they called the *ecclesia* – a Greek word we translate "church." There was no suggestion in the New Testament that a man or woman could decide to be a Christian and then make a later decision whether or not to be a member of this community. On the day of Pentecost the Church was suddenly there, and those who believed were added to it. Believing, being baptized, and joining the Church were apparently all aspects of the same event. Unlike most other religions, Christianity is a group enterprise and there is no such thing as a lone and isolated Christian. To me, there is a fearful arrogance in saying, "I love Christ, but loathe the company of disciples he created to proclaim his gospel and carry on his ministry."

Further, I believe the Church has a future because I see incredible faithfulness and vitality in its visible and human manifestation in local congregations like our own. Yes, we are relatively small in number; we sometimes struggle to pay our bills and just stay even on our membership rolls. And yet, I am moved by the worship of a mixed group of people of all ages seeking to express their sense of God's presence and to respond to the Word and Sacraments of Christ. I am touched by what one can only call the signs of grace, whereby lives are changed, friendships formed, forgiveness experienced, and children nurtured in the faith. I marvel at the diverse way in which you as church members respond to the call to minister to others in the name of Jesus. I am excited by the strength of spiritual ties that hold together people of widely different temperaments and opinions. And I rejoice that, in spite of all failures and follies, the Holy Spirit does offer in a living Church the supportive fellowship we all so sorely need. I'll never forget the young woman I knew back in Texas who became a member of the Church for the first time shortly before she was stricken with cancer. From her hospital bed she said to me with a smile: "I never knew before what it meant to have the backing of a church." The more a church offers such backing – even when we are socially distanced – the more I love it and the more I believe it has a promising future.

Lastly, I believe the Church will never die because, with all her faults, Christ has chosen this company of people to be the instruments of his love on earth and opened her doors wide to receive all who respond to his gospel. The Church may limp and sputter through this era of change and confusion, but where else is there such a worldwide community of faith, such a fellowship of hope, and such a reservoir of love? And always, out ahead, where the world finds chaos and darkness, I hear the hallelujahs of the Church triumphant.

“On this rock,” says Jesus, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” I confess that for years I misunderstood the image that Jesus uses here at Caesarea Philippi. I pictured the Church being on the defensive, being assaulted on every side by the forces of sin, evil, and death; a Church under siege, sometimes being tempted to wave the white flag, yet still managing to survive. But I finally noticed that the image conveys the opposite scenario. Jesus does not say, “the armies of Hades will not prevail against the Church”; rather, he says, “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” The last time I checked, gates do not attack or inflict damage upon an enemy; gates just sit there passively; they either open or close, stand or fall. In other words, it is the forces of darkness who are on the defensive, making a last desperate stand against the forces of light; and it is the Church that is on the offensive, storming the gates of evil, injustice, and death itself. The weapons the Church uses – weapons like compassion, forgiveness, and sacrificial love – seem to be no match for those of its adversaries. But Jesus promises that the gates of hell cannot withstand these weapons. God intends to use the Church to vanquish evil, and the outcome of the battle is certain.

Do you remember the stirring second stanza of Harry Emerson Fosdick’s great hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*? It begins: “Lo! the hosts of evil round us scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!” – a grim picture, indeed. But the stanza continues: “Fears and doubts too long have bound us, free our hearts to work and praise. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the living of these days.” Friends, armed with such wisdom and courage, the Church will never die.