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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 21a, August 27, 2023
Matthew 16:13-29

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the second Sunday in a row talking about rocks!

Today's Gospel lesson records a pivotal moment. In today's Gospel lesson, Matthew tells us about Peter's great confession. When Jesus questions him, "Who do you say I am," Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." It has taken sixteen chapters for Peter to come to this point. It's finally sinking in for Peter and the other disciples that there is something about this Master Whom they follow. It is not just what He *says*, it is not just what He *does*, it is *Who* He is that is of monumental importance. Jesus is the Christ, which is the Greek translation of Messiah, meaning Anointed One.

When Peter makes this great confession – probably blurts it out without thinking about it too much, if we know anything about Peter – Jesus is so pleased that He calls Peter blessed, then He makes a little pun playing on the similarity between Peter's name and the word for rock and announces that it is on this rock that He will build His church. (Did you know that *petra* is Greek for rock or stone? Think of *petrified* wood.) Just like in the hymn we just sang, we say the church is built on a rock. I happen to love that hymn because that image of the rock is so stirring. I picture a great big old church standing on top of a stone so massive it looks like a mountain, where nothing can ever threaten it. So if you didn't know the reference before, where that rock imagery came from, you do now. It goes back to Peter's confession in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew.

So there, in one short text, we have the identity of Jesus and the foundation of the Church. You see why it is a pivotal moment? And that is what I mean to talk about today. What is the relationship between Jesus and the church? I know that it seems like such an obvious relationship, you might wonder why we need to talk about it at all. But we do, because if we get this wrong – if we don't get our foundations right, it will all come tumbling down.

Last week Pastor Greg preached on the wise man who built his house on rock. He urged us to build our lives with Jesus as our foundation. Today, I am

hoping to expand on that theme by thinking through what it means for Jesus to be the foundation of the whole church on earth.

It is especially interesting for me to get to preach on this key moment in Matthew, because we have started doing a series on the entire Gospel of Matthew. Our Wednesday liturgies used to feature a preview of the Sunday sermon. This was particularly helpful in my case because it kept me from trying to write an entire sermon on Saturday evening! But I am thrilled about this new series, because it is something we hadn't really done before, until we started that series on the Sermon on the Mount that just finished. The Church Fathers would preach their way through whole books of the Bible. Many evangelical preachers today do the same thing. But we have followed the Lutheran tradition of sticking to the lectionary, which means that we tend to jump around in the Bible from week to week.

The lectionary is wonderful because it gives us big, juicy themes, and it connects New Testament passages with the Old Testament in ways that are important to understanding Scripture. But going through one book verse by verse, or at least, story by story, is a very different challenge. For one thing, it allows more depth and detail, and each sermon can build on the one before it. But what's more interesting, and maybe also a bit more nerve-wracking, at least for me, is that this kind of *lectio continua* preaching means that we can't skip over the difficult passages, the ones that make people squirm. These are passages that are often left out of the lectionary altogether, so even if you read them in your private devotions or discuss them in Bible study, and I hope you do that, you might never have heard an actual sermon on the passage. Pastor Greg and I planned out the texts for every Wednesday for the rest of the year, and some of the passages are exciting to us, because they are a chance to meditate on some nice stories. But some of the other texts are downright uncomfortable. For example, the part of Matthew where Jesus says that He has not come to bring peace but a sword. Or the part where He talks about the unforgivable sin.

So think of today's sermon as a part of that series on Matthew, even though it jumps ahead. We will be getting into the weeds with those Wednesday sermons, but today we have a really clear picture of a bigger theme that will help give some shape to all those mini-sermons that we plan. What is the relationship between the identity of Jesus and the foundation of the church? Why is Peter's confession the turning point of the Gospel of Matthew?

In fact, this passage that we have before us today contains its own thorny theological issues. For example, what exactly does it mean that *Peter* is the rock on which the church is built, if that is indeed what Jesus means? Does this mean that the Roman Catholics are right about the primacy of the Bishop of Rome? And this business of binding and loosing and the keys to heaven... what is going on there? Does this mean, for example, that there is no salvation outside of the church?! I don't mean to be a tease, but I won't be able to wrestle with those fascinating questions today. I promise to cover them when this passage comes up again during our Wednesday preaching series.

Today I have something else on my mind, and it is Peter's confession, "You are the Christ," and Jesus's response, "[On this] I will build My church." There is a connection here and we need to understand it. We have to get this basic stuff right if we are going to tackle the rest of Matthew. We have to get this stuff right if we are going to make sense of why we are here at church in the first place, and why the church of the apostles is an institution worth defending with all our heart and all our might .

The word that we translate church is *ekklesia* in Greek. Think of the word ecclesiastical. For us, the connotation of this word is purely religious. But for the Greeks, *ekklesia* meant any kind of assembly. It could refer to a political, religious, or purely social assembly. In other words, it was a communal gathering of some kind.

If somebody asked you, what is church, you would probably answer, "Well, it's a place where people come together communally to worship Jesus." And you would be exactly right. Because Jesus, as Peter has just reminded us, is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Peter and the other disciples are slowly putting two and two together and realizing that Jesus is not just to be listened to and emulated, He is to be worshiped!

But let's say someone were to ask you, *what is church good for, or why should we have churches, or why do **you** go to church?* What if someone were to ask you to justify the existence of churches in an increasingly secular society? Even if this question seems absurd or offensive to you, I'm afraid it comes up more often than you might think.

Obviously, I don't know the details of your own lives, but if I had to extrapolate from my own experiences, I bet there have been times, especially living in New York City, where you have felt a bit put on the defensive about

attending church, especially if you attend and participate regularly. As though it were an antiquated habit of some kind, a throwback to yesteryear! And I don't know about you, but if you are like me or people I know, you might have been tempted to respond by listing all the benefits of church attendance.

It's a place where people find community! It's a place where people find hope! It's a place where people find meaning! It's a place where people help one another and show kindness to one another and work together for a better world. Churches are good for society, because they provide all sorts of services and experiences that people don't find elsewhere. And in fact, studies show that people who attend church are, on the whole, happier and they tend to live longer.¹

Now, none of these things are wrong, and I really do pray that everyone finds community, hope, and meaning at Immanuel, and I really do hope that we are serving others and making the world a better place.

But I recently read an opinion piece in the Washington Post, and it got me thinking.² Actually, if I'm being honest, it made me very sad. It made me sad because it illustrates what a limited, paltry understanding so many people in our world have of what church is.

The writer, Perry Bacon Jr., explains that he grew up Christian, in a charismatic congregation that was central to his young life, but now he finds himself a "none." N-O-N-E "Nones" are people who don't identify with any particular religion or faith, and this now includes as much as 30% of the American population. Perry turned his back on the faith of his youth first when he began to disagree with some of the church's moral teachings that he didn't like, and later, he simply fell out of the habit of attending altogether. But he now finds himself missing the benefits that church provided.

In his own words, he (quote) sees a "church-sized hole in American life." He wishes there was there a place where children could learn values like forgiveness and tolerance, young adults could meet potential spouses, retirees could build new relationships, people could all be reminded to be more compassionate, and there would be singing and - he actually says this - **brunch**.

¹ [New Pew Research Study Finds Religious People Are Happier \(oprahdaily.com\)](http://www.oprahdaily.com)

² [Opinion | I used to be a Christian. Now I miss church. - The Washington Post](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

So what Perry proposes in his op-ed piece is that there be a church for the “nones.” He wants an *ekklesia*, an assembly of the people, but he wants it to fit around his own beliefs and be designed to serve his own needs, and the needs he perceives in those of his social circle. He says he gets a little of this stuff from the weekly farmers’ market and the journalists’ happy hour, but none of those options provide the “singing, sermons, and solidarity” he craves. (His definition of sermon, by the way, is a (quote) “positive message.” I am not sure if my sermon would meet his specifications.)

So what Perry Bacon wants is *ekklesia* without Jesus.

He is not the first to have had that idea. In 2013, in England, two stand-up comedians started an organization they called Sunday Assembly. They were atheists, but they missed the social and aesthetic benefits of churchgoing, so they endeavored to create their own *ekklesia*, just leaving out the God part. But even with the singing, the motivational speakers, and the casseroles (casseroles were lifted up as a particular benefit by one American participant), the Sunday Assembly hasn’t really caught on, and more than half of the assemblies have petered out since the movement began.

I am tempted to roll my eyes, I admit. The image of a roomful of atheists earnestly playing church the way children play house just seems so... cringe. But I am even more tempted to weep, because it is tragic. Here are people with a God-sized hole in their life, and they think they can fill it with Stevie Wonder songs and brunch. They have some admirable instincts. The instinct to want to deepen their bonds with their fellow man is one. The instinct to want to pass on morals and values to our children is another. And they have some legitimate complaints about things that have happened in different churches in this fallen world. It is true that there are hypocrites who have made Christianity look bad, and people who confuse politics with faith, and other failures among people who are, after all, sinners like the rest of us.

But I am sure it is more than obvious to you that they will never find what they are looking for if they keep doing what they are doing. They sense that there is something special about church and they want it, but they are under the mistaken impression that the sort of *ekklesia* they are imagining is a purely human institution that they can recreate on their own terms. As long as you have the songs and the social justice messages and the good vibes, you have everything you need and you can get rid of any superstitious stuff and

any moral teachings you don't think are relevant anymore.

And it is not just atheists and “nones” who try to recreate church in their own image and turn it into an empty shell. As the Sunday Assembly experiment demonstrates, eventually these counterfeit churches will lose steam and the participants will find other ways to satisfy their need for potlucks and good vibes.

But what I really fear is that good-hearted Christians will somehow buy into some of those same ideas, that churches ought to justify their existence by being useful and providing positive experiences for people. What worries me is Christians earnestly wanting to love their neighbors, which is what we are commanded to do, and then reaching out with kindness and compassion and a spirit of generosity but neglecting the most foundational truth of all. I mean Peter's confession, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus is Lord. Without this foundation, the whole edifice comes crashing down.

Peter's great confession reminds us what the church is and what its mission is; to reveal God to the world through Jesus the Christ. The church that is built on a rock is the church that proclaims Christ the Lord. The “church” that does not proclaim Christ offers neither hope nor succor in a fallen world, no matter how many other good works it promotes. The “church” that does not stay true to the apostolic proclamation cannot provide comfort to grieving hearts or speak of true justice for those who have been wronged or shine a light for sinful humanity. The church that is not a true church cannot lead the way to the Kingdom of God.

In our epistle lesson today, Saint Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world.” That is a warning not just for us as individuals but for us as congregations too. Congregations, denominations, and synods have their flaws, because they are composed of sinful human beings, but the Church that is built on the Rock of Christ is not a human institution. Do not be conformed to this world and try to make it anything less than that. The mission of the church is to proclaim Christ; Christ as Messiah, Savior, and Immanuel – God-with-us. Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. All the other things that happen in church are wonderful gifts from God, but a church that does not stand on the rock of Peter's confession that Jesus is Lord is counterfeit, fraudulent, and cruel.

At our recent NALC convocation in Oklahoma City, when it came time to vote

on the budget, there was a discussion about what organizations we ought to support as a church with our tithes. One of the organizations in question was a Lutheran organization that does aid work around the globe. There was some concern that this particular organization, although it does a lot of good works, avoids using the name of Jesus in certain parts of the world. It does this not because it is dangerous to speak of Jesus. (That is a real and tragic issue, but not what is happening here.) It avoids the name of Jesus because it wants to focus on good works without causing offense to anybody.

Bless the good folks of the NALC. They voted to investigate the matter further before approving that part of the budget, because the NALC has one simple rule about organizations it supports. They have to join Peter in his great confession, that Jesus is Lord! We are part of Christ's church, and we understand that the mission of the church is to proclaim Christ to the world!

This does not mean that I think that secular organizations do not do good works! By no means! When the news broke about the tragic Maui wildfires, I decided to donate to the Red Cross, a secular organization, because they have a proven track record of helping during natural disasters. So I am not criticizing any charities or relief organizations for not being Christian, and I think that as individuals, we ought to try to help our neighbor in the most effective ways available to us.

But the mission of the church is to give the world Jesus! We are gathered here in the name of Jesus to worship Him, and we invite the rest of the city and the world to come and find Him here. And after we have received Him here, in His Word and in His body and blood, we can go out and bring others to Him. The world is full of sorrow and oppression and God-sized holes in peoples' hearts. The solution is not in the singing, the sermonizing, the fellowship, or God help us, in brunch; it's in Jesus. It's in the church that is built on a rock, the church that is built on that eternal cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

To Him be the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.