



Sermon Transcript

October 1, 2017

Living Sent Lives

Jesus Sent the Church

Matthew 16:13-23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 1, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

²¹ From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Introduction

The church? Really? This is who Jesus sends into this world to unlock the doors to the kingdom of heaven? The church? Has Jesus visited any churches lately? At least here in the West, the church doesn't seem to be making many advances, does it? Ross Hastings says of the church in the West, that it "is beginning to look a lot like a fear-filled, retreated, "walls-up," not very influential community."¹ When we think of missions, we tend to think of missionaries being sent from the West to the Two-Thirds world. (The Two-Thirds world is a term used to describe those outside of Europe and North America.) But do you realize that 70 percent of the world's Christians live outside of the West and that missionaries are being sent from all six continents in the world? In fact, missionaries from other continents are being sent here. Leslie Newbigin says of the West, that "without possibility of question, it is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time."² We are living on the edge, the frontier of the mission field. It is to this frontier, that we have been sent as a church.

The church? Really? Has Jesus visited any churches lately? Not only does it seem that the church has waning influence in the world, but we know what it is often like inside the doors of the church. It is not always pretty. Chuck Colson wrote a book about the church and in it he said that church is like Noah's ark. "The stench inside would be unbearable if it were not for the storm outside."³ And yet he says, "this is the church we have. And as imperfect we find it at times, we need to acknowledge that it is through this church of fact that truth is being proclaimed and portrayed."⁴

The church? Yes! Really! In our passage this morning we hear the defiantly optimistic tone of Jesus when he says, "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" Jesus made this comment to his disciples as they withdrew to Caesarea Philippi, on the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. They withdrew to rest as Jesus was getting ready to make his final trek to Jerusalem. We see in verse 21 that he was beginning to prepare his disciples for his pending death on the cross. It says here, "*From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" But his pending death was far from the end of the story. It was just the beginning. The promised kingdom of God was just beginning to break into this world and it is still advancing today . . . through the church.

When we see the word "church" we think of a religious institution. But in the Greek, the word is *ekklesia* and it could be used in a generic way to simply refer to "an assembly or a gathering of people." Now in the Old Testament, it was used to refer to "the assembly

of God's people." And yet, keep in mind, when you see the word "church" in the Gospel of Matthew the focus is on the gathering of a people—not a building, not a pew, not a steeple—but a people. Jesus was preparing his disciples to recognize that their fellowship would not come to an end after his death and his resurrection and his departure. Rather, it is quite the opposite. Instead, the fruit of his ministry is that God would form communities of disciples. Steve Addison puts it this way, "The goal and the intention of Jesus' ministry was the formation of a missionary movement that would make disciples and multiply communities of his followers throughout the world."⁵ In other words, the advance of the gospel is not just marked with new converts and new disciples of Jesus. But wherever the gospel went it was marked with the establishment of new churches.

This is the third sermon in our series called "Living Sent Lives." This morning we are going to conclude laying the foundation for this series. The purpose of the foundation of this series is to acknowledge that we are a sent people because God is a sending God. Because of the love of God, God has sent his Son, Jesus, who "pitched his tent among us" and gave "grace upon grace" so that we might know God. And then, God sent the Holy Spirit to do that work in us to bring us to God and to empower us to give witness to Jesus. And so this morning, we finish laying the foundation by acknowledging that just as the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit; the church—the community of his followers—has been sent into the world to make Christ known.

What I want you to see this morning is that when we talk about living sent lives, we are not just talking about what we do individually as we live out our lives from Monday to Sunday. Rather, I want you to see that it is the church that has been sent. In the book of Revelation, it is the church that is described as the "*lampstand*." We don't just need more individuals shining the light of Jesus wherever we go. We need more churches where the light of Christ is shining. This week I saw a satellite image of Puerto Rico and it was a satellite image of what Puerto Rico looked like at night before the hurricane and then after hurricane. Before the hurricane, there were concentrations of light all over the island, but after the hurricane darkness covered a vast majority of the island. That is a picture of the spiritual landscape of New England and Connecticut. There are dark places that are in need of light. Here we are on the frontier of the mission field, and we need more light, more communities of Jesus followers, more churches. With confidence in the defiantly optimistic words of Jesus, we need to rekindle our hope and with a fresh imagination dream of how Jesus might want to build his church through us. As we hear Jesus say this morning, "*I will build my church*," I want us to consider the kind of community that is needed in order to shine the light of Jesus in this mission field.

Jesus is Proclaimed

Our passage begins with Jesus asking his disciples a question. The question really centers around the person of Jesus and what you make of this Jesus. He wants to know what people are saying about him, and more pointedly, what do his disciples have to say about Jesus. And so he begins with the question, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” That title “*Son of Man*” is a loaded title. It is not a title that simply means that Jesus was human. For example, you might think that the title “Son of God” refers to the deity of Christ, while the title “Son of Man” refers to the humanity of Christ. But this title “*Son of Man*” is an exalted title that comes from the Old Testament.

In Daniel 7:13-14, Daniel sees a heavenly vision where from the clouds of heaven “*there came one like a son of man . . . And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*” And so when people were observing Jesus, they knew God was up to something. Consequently, they linked Jesus to the line of prophets who pointed to the coming Messiah, this Son of Man. Thus some said that Jesus was “*John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*” There was something special about Jesus, but they couldn’t quite put their finger on his full identity.

Turning to his disciples, he asked them, “*But who do you say that I am?*” Peter, responded, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” That term “*Christ*” is a title that means “*anointed one.*” In Hebrew it is the word for “*Messiah.*” It goes back to 2 Samuel 7:13-14, where King David is promised that from him will come one who will sit over God’s kingdom forever. And so Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is “that one!” He is the promised Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the Son of Man. Granted, at this point, Peter and the disciples didn’t understand the role the cross would play in bringing the promise of God’s blessing to this world. In fact, in verse 22, Peter responds to the news that Jesus would be going to the cross with a rebuke. He rebukes Jesus and says, “*Far be it from you Lord! This shall never happen.*” But in time, Peter would learn that the blessing of God’s forgiveness and the healing of broken lives and the coming of God’s kingdom would come through the cross of Jesus and that cross would mark the humble nature of his people.

What this culture needs and what this world needs are communities of Christ-followers who lovingly but boldly proclaim Jesus. Stephen Wellum notes that Gallup poll after Gallup poll indicate that people in our culture often affirm some kind of belief in Jesus,

but probing deeper usually reveals that their belief is ill-informed, confused and often contradictory to other beliefs they affirm.”⁶ It is much like the people in our passage who knew there was something special about this Jesus, but they couldn’t quite put their finger on it. And so out here in the frontier of the mission field we need communities of Christ followers who consistently affirm that Jesus is the divine Son who has become incarnate, that to know him is life eternal, and that to know him not is judgment unto death. Biblically speaking, getting Christ right is a matter of life and death.”⁷ It is on this confession that Jesus builds his church.

In a world looking for answers, we need to stop soft-selling the answer. Jesus is the answer! And so we will soon confess in our service, “I believe in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hades and on the third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father, from which he will come to judge the quick and the dead.” It is through Jesus you come to know God and it is through Jesus you can know true and lasting peace. May God raise up more communities of Christ followers who like Peter, boldly proclaim that Jesus is “*the Christ, the Son of the living God!*”

The Kingdom is Portrayed

Jesus responds to Peter and his profession of faith by saying, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*” This is a good reminder to us that it is the supernatural work of the Spirit of God that opens spiritual eyes and hearts to see Jesus for who he is. Jesus says in John 3 of the Holy Spirit, “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” We don’t know where the wind of the Spirit is blowing. But this we do know, the wind of the Spirit is blowing. That is what leads to the defiantly optimistic statement of Jesus when he says, “*I will build my church.*” Do you know what this truth does to us? It takes away the pressure of trying to make something happen. That is the work of God. We are just called to be faithful. But it also fills us with a measure of anticipation. I believe that even here, on the frontier of the mission field, God has people he is drawing to himself. What we need are communities of disciples to reach those people God is drawing to himself. This fills us with confidence as we proclaim Jesus. We will reach people with the love of Christ. There are stories yet to be told.

Then Jesus says to Peter, “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my*

church.” First of all, what you don’t see in the English version of this verse is the wordplay that is going on in this passage. The Greek word for “Peter” is *Petros* and the Greek word for “rock” is *petra*. Actually, the language Jesus spoke was Aramaic and the same word would have been used in this expression. To say it in English, it would go like this: “You are Rock, and on this rock I will build my church.”

This leads to one of the most debated verses in the New Testament. The debate stems from something that happens this month. The end of this month marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 500 years ago, a Roman Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther posted what is called “the ninety-five thesis” on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany. He was protesting some of the practices of the church, namely the selling of indulgences so that loved ones who had died could be set free from purgatory. For example, he protested with the 27th of the 95 thesis, “They preach man made doctrines who say that it’s so soon as the coin jingles in to the money box, the soul flies out of purgatory.” There was a little jingle that Tetzel an enterprising monk had come up with to raise money for the church and it went like this, “As soon as the money in the chest rings, a soul from purgatory springs.” Luther wanted to bring reform to the church and wanted to address these abuses.

But there was something deeper driving Luther and the Reformation. It sprung from Luther’s study of Romans 1:17. Here it says, “*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’*” He was wrestling with the idea of how one was made right with God. He was doing everything the church told him to do, but he found he could never do enough to be right with God. There was always another sin to confess or a failing of one kind or another. There was no end to penance or confession. But then in this verse he discovered that there is a righteousness that is ours by faith. Sproul says it this way, “Luther began to understand that what Paul was speaking of here was a righteousness that God in his grace was making available to those who would receive it passively, not those who would achieve it actively.”⁸ In other words, this righteousness that belongs to Jesus is something that is given to us by God. It is grace alone. It is faith alone. It is Christ alone. This really is the heart of the issue that led to the Reformation and the split from the Roman Catholic church. It is the nature of salvation by faith versus salvation through the activities and sacraments of the church. Luther said, “When I discovered that, I was born of the Holy Ghost. And the doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through.”⁹

So what does this have to do with the words of Jesus to Peter in our passage? Jesus said to Peter, “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*” The

traditional Roman Catholic view is that Peter was the first pope and that there has been this papal succession governing the church all the way back to Peter. And this verse is often alluded to for support of this teaching. So on the heels of the Reformation, as is often the case, there was an over-reaction to this notion that tried to distance itself from seeing Peter as the head of the church. As a result, a common interpretation was to downplay Peter's role and to say that Jesus is not talking about building the church on Peter, but on Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. But it is hard to deny the plain reading of the text, "*But you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*" It is pretty clear Jesus is talking about Peter. In fact, D. A. Carson says, "if it were not for Protestant reactions against extremes of the Roman Catholic interpretation, it is doubtful whether many would have taken 'rock' to be anything or anyone other than Peter."¹⁰ I think Jesus is talking about Peter here and we don't need to be afraid of that.

It is clear that Peter plays a prominent role in the founding of the church. It is to Peter Jesus appears after his resurrection in Luke 24. It is Peter who Jesus restores in John 21 and commissions him to "feed my sheep." Peter gives the first sermon of the church in Acts 2 when 3,000 confess Jesus to be Lord. For the first sixteen chapters of Acts, Peter plays a prominent role in laying the foundation of the church. Jesus is the one building the church, but Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:20 that the household of God is "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.*" In fact, in 1 Peter 2, Peter refers to the church as a spiritual house and we are all living stones being added to the "new temple," the people of God, the church.

And that is the point. The church is the people of God. Local churches are communities of disciples who come together because of our common confession of faith in Jesus and because we have tasted of the grace and the love of Jesus—we have a righteousness from God through faith—we portray the character of the kingdom of God by how we treat one another. That is why being sent is not just something that pertains to us as individuals. That is why we need churches to dot this landscape. We need to have places where people can see the quality of the kingdom of God portrayed in our love for one another. As we serve one another and as we forgive one another and as we love one another, we portray a picture of the kingdom of God at work.

We are people just like anyone else. Even Peter was a work in progress. No sooner did Jesus heap such lofty words upon him—*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church*—do we hear Jesus say to Peter a couple verses later, "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the*

things of man.” That is a pretty accurate picture of the church. On one hand, God is building his church through people like you and me, people in progress, who at times are “not setting our minds on the things of God, but on the things of man.” And yet, there is not an institution more glorious than the church. For as we bear with one another and love and forgive one another, we portray that the kingdom of God is here. There is nothing better that can be said about a local church than, “I experienced the love of God here.” This is what the church is sent to be, a visible demonstration of the love of God. We need more communities of disciples where people can see and touch the reality of God’s love. Truth is a person, Jesus. Truth needs to be caught as well as taught. And so Jesus says, “*You are Peter*” and on people like Peter, people like you and me, Jesus is building his church!

A Persistent Witness

This leaves us with our final thought as we consider what it means for the church to live as being sent. We should be a persistent witnesses to our culture. Here we are, out on the outer frontier of the mission field, and yet, Jesus speaks with such defiant optimism that we should anticipate that God is going to use us as we seek to live as a people who are sent. Listen to what he says about the witness of the church, “*the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” He gives to Peter, “*keys of the kingdom of heaven.*” Through the proclamation of the gospel, authority has been given to pronounce the forgiveness of sins to those who turn in faith to Jesus.

When Jesus says that the “*gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” he literally uses the word “*Hades*” which is a reference to the realm of death. What Jesus is saying here is that death will not overpower the church. Death was rendered powerless with Jesus, he rose from the dead. Peter said of Jesus in Acts 2:31, “*he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.*” Persecution and death threatened the early church, but the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church. Even in our day and age, we have seen places that have tried to stamp out the church through persecution, places like China and the Middle East, and yet the “the gates of death will not prevail against it.” Nor does the church come and go with the passing of one generation to the next. Rather, for 2,000 years, the church has endured from generation to generation. I think of what Nabeel Qureshi said before cancer took his life, “Jesus is the God of reversal and redemption. He redeemed sinners to life by his death, and he redeemed a symbol of execution by repurposing it for salvation.”¹¹ In other words, the “gates of death” will not prevail against the church. Instead, “*Death has been swallowed up in victory . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.*”

Now there is a unique role that Peter plays in the story of the church. Jesus says to him, *"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."* What is interesting to consider about Peter, as his story unfolds in the book of Acts, is how God uses him to open the door for the advance of the gospel. So he puts the key in the "Jewish door" on the Day of Pentecost, when he preaches the gospel in Jerusalem. In Acts 8, he puts the key in the "Samaritan door," when a Samaritan made profession of faith and when Peter came, this man received the Spirit like the Jews did in Acts 2. And then in Acts 10, it was Peter who went to the home of the Gentile, namely the home of Cornelius, and he and his family came to faith in Christ as well. Michael Wilkins says, "Once Peter used the keys to open the door to the kingdom of God, he passes from the scene. The door to the kingdom now stands open throughout the ages, so the keys are no longer needed."¹² Do you know what that means? The doors are not shut! They are still opened. So let us persist in giving witness to Jesus!

In doing so, *"whatever we bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* In other words, based on the promise of the gospel of Jesus, we have the authority to announce that sins are forgiven or that a person remains in their sin. It is all based on the confession that Peter made of Jesus. We do this when we take communion. Repeating the Heidelberg Catechism, we say, "as sure as you hold this bread and as sure as you hold this cup, if you come to Jesus by faith, you can be sure that your sins are forgiven."

We need communities of disciples that persist in giving witness to Jesus Christ. In Jesus, death has been defeated. The doors to the kingdom have been unlocked for all people. Therefore, with great hope we can come with a message of God's grace and forgiveness. Jesus is the Son of the Living God and his kingdom of peace and forgiveness of sin has come. There is a righteousness that is given to us by faith.

Conclusion

The church? Really? Yes! The Church! God is a sending God. He sent his Son, Jesus. He sent the Holy Spirit. He sends the church. Here we are, on the frontier of the mission field. Who knew? Would you begin to pray that God would send the church and form communities of disciples all throughout New England so that the light of Jesus would shine. Pray for communities that boldly proclaim what Peter proclaimed, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Pray that these communities of disciples would portray a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like. And pray that there would be a persistent witness in every town and in every city for the glory of God.

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- ¹Ross Hastings *Missional God, Missional Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012) Kindle Location 337
- ²Leslie Newbigin *Missionalia* 17, no. 3 (1989) 213
- ³Chuck Colson *The Body* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992) 73
- ⁴*Ibid.*, 73
- ⁵Steve Addison *What Jesus Started* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012) 50
- ⁶Stephen J. Wellum *God the Son Incarnate* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) 37
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 37
- ⁸R. C. Sproul “Justification by Faith Alone: Martin Luther and Romans 1:17” www.ligonier.org, May 3, 2016
- ⁹*Ibid.*
- ¹⁰D. A. Carson *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 367-369
- ¹¹John Stonestreet “”Why Doesn’t God Always Heal?” Breakpoint, September 26, 2017
- ¹²Michael J. Wilkins *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 567

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Is there a missionary you know or support? If so, share something about that missionary with your group. As a group, decide if you would like to “adopt” a missionary our church supports. At the least, “adopt” means pray for and encourage. The missions committee can help you identify a missionary to adopt.
2. Share how you are doing with your “next step of obedience.” What are you learning about yourself through this process?
3. What was one thing that stood out to you from the sermon?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read Matthew 16:13-19. What do you make of the “defiantly optimistic” words of Jesus? How do they encourage you?
5. React to this statement made about the West: “without possibility of question, it is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.” Why is that so?
6. How does viewing the place where we live as “the most challenging frontier of our time” impact how you view the need for more churches? Why?
7. Read 1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-12 and discuss what it says about the church. Why do we need more “communities of disciples” (churches) that proclaim Jesus, portray the kingdom and persist in giving witness?



Taking It Home

8. Spend some time praying for Connecticut and New England. Pray that God would raise up more churches in every town and city and that the church would embrace the hopeful tone of Matthew 16:13-19.