

The Church On the Rock

Matthew 16:13-19

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

A special thank you to Captain Christine Miller for reading Scripture today; it's good to have you here. Let us join together in prayer. Now, Lord Jesus Christ, since you are the foundation upon which this church is built, upon which all of our lives are rooted deeply, we pray that your word would be clear to us, now, by the power of your Spirit. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the purpose of the church? Why are we here today? It is to proclaim and demonstrate the complete life— words, teaching, works, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension— of Jesus Christ, who is the rock of our salvation. The Church belongs to Jesus. This church belongs to Jesus. It does not belong to any particular individual or group; it does not belong to the denomination. It belongs to Jesus Christ. We are all about Jesus, here, at The National Presbyterian Church. We confess Jesus is our Foundation, our Cornerstone and the Head of this Church. Jesus founded us upon this personal faith confession of Peter: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Today, like during the time of Jesus, when he was up against that sloping hill of Mt. Hermon in Caesarea Philippi, we live in a spiritually hungry and multi- religious culture. Caesarea Philippi was a wealthy resort community, rebuilt, not too long before Jesus' time, by Phillip, who was Governor of Syria, in honor of Caesar Augustus: 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee; on the Slope of Mt. Hermon, now called the Golan Heights; the eastern headwaters of the Jordan River, and in fact, the edge between the Gentile lands and the Jewish land of Israel. This is where the Romans and Greeks came to vacation— to relax, to recreate, to reflect on their religions. When they went away on vacation they took time to invest in their faith. And Jesus takes the disciples up that long slope toward Hermon, to be in Caesarea Philippi for this conversation.

Caesarea Philippi is a place where there were many gods. Already, archeology has unveiled 14 temples— a Syrian temple of Ba'al worship; a white marble temple of worship to Caesar Augustus; worship of the Greek god, Pan, who is the god of nature and the god of fear (from which we get the word “panic.”) And where they worshipped Pan was a huge opening in a rock where the eastern waters of the Jordan River would flow from; it had become known, because of its ugly look, as the “Gates of Hades.” In that rock— a place of human sacrifice at the headwaters of the Jordan River...shrines to gods, cut out of the mountain side and rock; a place in the shadow of ancient gods; a place that converges many of the great stories of the Old Testament, with Ba'al worship... the Philistines... the Canaanites... the Sidonians... and the Hivites. Against that backdrop of secular paganism, Jesus asks the disciples the big questions: Who do people say the Son of Man is? Who do you say that I am?

Today, we live in a culture of many religious perspectives and faiths. This context of Jesus' profound question is being asked today among us. We wrestle with the same concerns of pagan faith all around us... of many religions all around us. And there is a pattern that we see here, of how Jesus treated other religions, that we must attend to. What we do not see in this text is, there is no fear of other religions; there is no attack upon them. Jesus does not have a polemic against them; no disdain uttered from his lips about other religions. No judgment against... no condemnation for... there is no devaluation of people who believe other things. While there is no affirmation of them, as well, God affirms in Jesus' life that, to be a person of faith—to seek God in any religion—is something that he recognizes is the very nature of our humanity. Against that backdrop, we see a strategy that Jesus establishes upon the rock of who he is, regarding engagement of other faiths: 1. Go to where the pagans go (he takes the disciples up to Mt. Hermon). 2. Engage people seeking God in any way. 3. Affirm people wanting to understand and know Jesus. 4. Ask questions that focus on who Jesus is. 5. Call attention to Jesus in the face of all world religions and compare him to all other gods and belief systems.

Here at The National Presbyterian Church, we have people of many faiths who come here to visit us, who actually attend regularly. They come here to hear about Jesus. They come here because we do not fear them, or attack them, or demean them. We open our doors to whomever wants to come and be a part of our worship experience. And they come here, according to their own words, (as I've heard several times) “to hear more about Jesus.” Everyone's fascinated with Jesus: Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and others. The pagan secular cultural context of many religions reveals, as a backdrop, who Jesus really is. It's a wonderful contrast to see all of the religions of the world as the background to the question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

It is better to be a seeker or follower of Jesus in a world of faith options, I believe, than to be caged-up in a closed religious and bigotrous system— to be with only people that agree with you. Jesus never led that kind of a life. Jesus encouraged the disciples to be in the presence of people of other faith perspectives. After all, it is the closed bigotry that killed Jesus in Jerusalem—not all the other religions of the world.

My personal observation is that students at secular universities often have a strength of identity and perspective because they've been challenged with all of the questions in their young years of adulthood—to really think through who God is, in Jesus Christ. My daughter, Tamara, went to a Presbyterian school. She was in a small group there, in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. And Tamara, being my daughter, likes to ask a lot of questions. Well, it wasn't long into the second meeting that somebody turned to her and said, “Tamara, you just ask too many questions. You need to just simply accept all of this by faith. Don't ask so many questions.” Fortunately, the InterVarsity leader was discerning enough to know that her questioning was a positive pattern of life. However, the group couldn't handle it; so she took Tamara aside and discussed all of those questions with her in private.

Do you find yourself getting frustrated that people are asking so many questions about Jesus in regard to other faiths? Don't be. That's where the depth of faith is discovered and where you find that there is a rock in Jesus Christ. It is good to ask questions of Jesus in this complex, multi-religious world. Jesus can handle the questions; he can stand up to the inquiry. It is in the full spotlight of questioning that Jesus shines brightest. The deeper you dig into Jesus, the more you realize you are drilling into solid rock. Other religions, in comparison to Jesus, can feel like soft rock or shifting sand. Because who else has a Messiah who suffers and dies and is raised from the dead? There is only One who can stand the test— and that's Jesus Christ.

But Jesus has a caution here for the disciples at the end of the section we just read in verse 20. After Peter has proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, he says, "But don't go tell anybody that." Do you ever find that to be a strange response from Jesus? This is the high moment— let's go out and tell people Jesus is Messiah! Shhh. Don't tell anybody. Don't be quick to proclaim Jesus is Messiah unless you are willing to embrace the full impact of what that means.

Well what's going on? As we read on in Matthew 16, immediately we find the answer to the question: it's uphill all the way, from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi and up to Mount Hermon – probably the Mount of Transfiguration. The disciples loved the ascent up to the mountaintop. And Peter wanted to stay at the mountaintop as long as possible. What they didn't appreciate was Jesus' teaching as they came down the mountain, and what was before them. In Matthew 16:21, Jesus orders the disciples not to tell he is Messiah. As much as Peter was right, he wasn't totally right. He had the up- side right—but he was not comprehending the down- side of his Messianic call. Listen to what happens next between Peter and Jesus as we read on in the text:

"From that time on [as they were descending from the mountain] Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. But Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' [After all, you're Messiah.] But Jesus turned [and as if he said...Jesus got in Peter's face, up close and personal] and said, 'Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things.'"

Peter, in his arrogance of proclaiming the Gospel, had it only partly right. He was missing and refusing to accept, the 2nd and 3rd acts of Jesus' life: his suffering and his resurrection. He missed the Good News of Jesus' suffering and death. He missed the Good News of Jesus being raised from the dead. Jesus did not want the disciples to proclaim an inadequate message of the Messiah. There is no Messiah who is the Rock of our salvation who also does not suffer and die, and be raised. Jesus said about himself on the way to the cross: "If I am lifted up [on the cross], I will draw all humanity to me." People from all religions—they'll see the Messiah clearly. The full faith is following Messiah who lived among us, taught us the Kingdom of God, healed the sick, fed the hungry, voluntarily went to Jerusalem to suffer and die, and then was raised from the dead. If you want to be anchored deeply into the rock of the complete Jesus, if you want to stand on the solid ground of the whole Gospel, you will know and follow the crucified Lord, as well as the risen one.

Some Christians are strong on Jesus' teaching. Some Christians are strong on his resurrection. But many Christians are just simply light on his suffering and death. We tend to be like Peter: hesitant to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to suffer and die. And why is that? Because it means we, too, must go to Jerusalem to deal with the suffering and the death. We like the idea of being raised to new life; but we don't particularly like the idea of dying to an old life. Like Peter, we like the 'shortcut' Gospel – we want the easy way. We want to be able to climb to the heights, but we don't want to descend with Jesus into Hell. We want an easy belief in the resurrection, without the gracious strength to live his life of sacrifice, suffering and death.

And Jesus says simply this: don't build your house on the sand of easy belief. Build your house on the hard rock of action: doing the will of God, which is the cost of discipleship. Be willing to follow Jesus all the way into his suffering and his death, and through that, to resurrection. Let's not make any soft assumptions or sandy beach speculations about Jesus. Offer yourself to Jesus to be a committed disciple, who builds your life upon a Solid Rock, and who puts Jesus' words into action.

How do we stand and walk in a world of multiple religions and faiths? The hymn that we will sing later says it all: "On Christ the Solid Rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand." So the key question for you today is: Are you building your life upon the full Jesus— the One who lived and healed; the One who taught; the One who suffered and died? And the one who is raised from the dead? Jesus said, if you don't build your life upon the action of the full life of Jesus, you have a gap in your life. You have an inadequate anchoring in your life. As Jesus said in his own "Sermon on the Mount,"

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, will be like a wise person who built his house on rock. The rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall."

Oh, it is easy to come here and believe the words and to say, "I believe." But it's not so easy to go out and live the whole life in the pattern of Jesus Christ. We need to follow a Messiah who has faced the toughest storms of life and made it through. We know that he is the God who can lead us through the worst that life can throw at us, because he's been there. He stands with us— underneath us... beside us... in front of us... and behind us— because he is our Rock.

Rodney Stark, in his ground-breaking sociological study of the early church, *The Rise of Christianity*, says,

"In terrible times, the pagans bailed out. They did not have the ability to stand in the pain. It was the Christians who followed Jesus, who stayed behind to care for the wounded and the diseased. In the face of pain and conflict and struggle, plagues and war, it was the followers of Christ who stood and cared for those who were in pain."

And how did they learn that? They learned that from a Jesus who was willing to suffer and die on a cross. The early church grew because people had a clear comparison to make between the pagans who ran, and the Christians who made a stand. Pagan religions

cannot compete with the courage of committed followers of Jesus during tough times.

This is a message for us today at The National Presbyterian Church. We follow a Messiah who did not run away from pain... or crisis... or conflict; he stayed the course. NPC is built upon the Rock of Jesus Christ—the Christ who is crucified and risen. Let each of us who are members, be solid members of this church and work to keep it founded upon the Rock. Are you willing to follow him in the way that he leads, all the way to the gates of Hell, to discover that he was willing to descend into that dark cave for you? Or will you just make another day of it to listen to another sermon... make an easy evaluation... go home... and get blown away by the next storm of life? Don't let that be your future. Don't let that be the future of this church. Commit to following Jesus all the way to the cross—through the suffering and the death, to the resurrection. That is rock-solid faith. And no other religion in the world can compare to that.

Who do you say that Jesus is? What is your answer? Jesus, the Messiah, crucified and risen, is the only firm foundation on which to build your life and the life of this church. Let us pray. Oh, Lord Jesus Christ, you are our firm foundation. Upon you we build our lives—the fullness of who you are, as the One who lived and taught, healed, suffered and died, and was raised from the dead. Now lead us into a life of action, built upon who you are. In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.