

Until Then . . .
Matthew 16:13-20
Sermon for Salem Homecoming
October 21, 2007

One of these days when we are least expecting it as we are going about our ordinary, daily activities; Jesus is going to come and carry His church home. He will purge and purify His church; He will perfect His beautiful body and present her to Himself as Paul puts it as a bride for her husband. She will be spotless. She will be blameless. She will be at last the beautiful body of Christ. Every truly born again and blood bought believer who has been a part of the flawed faithful upon the earth will be participants in this party. We will be captured by Jesus and gathered before Him to receive the rewards that are ours because of the work that we have done in the church and through the church for the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. Purged, purified and perfected; we will then at the end of a horrible time of desolation and destruction upon the earth come with Jesus back to the earth to reign with Him and with His Holy Angels for one thousand years at the end of which the heavens and the earth will pass away and Jesus will bring to be the new heaven and the new earth which will be populated by His people forever and ever and ever. One of these days.

Until then as a part of the body of Christ, the church, we simply want to be faithful to Him being and doing all that He has called us to be and do until at last He calls us home. Make no mistake about it: the church in our culture is in trouble. Never in the history of this great land has the church been in more desperate need of a genuine move of the Holy Spirit in the church. We shall never experience Pentecost again, but would to God we could see in our day in our land something akin to it. It is happening in other places. What we see of the church in Africa and in parts of Asia makes the church in America look very foreign to what the church is supposed to be. Three to four thousand churches close their doors each year. Southern Baptists for the first time in our history have seen a yearly decline in baptisms. In fact, the leading category of baptisms for Southern Baptists last year was in the age range of five and under. Over seventy-five percent of our churches are not growing and eighty seven percent of our churches last year had no record of any adults surrendering their lives to Jesus. Some of this is due to churches being in areas where there is no growth , thus little hope for numerical growth. Some of this reality is due to an unwillingness to change methods even when the message is not changed. But so much of it is due to the fact that we must face and fail to face to our peril: our churches of every denomination are populated with people who profess to know Jesus but whose

lives do not reveal any real or radical change. The divorce rate upon professing conservative evangelicals is equal to that of the rest of the population and among Baptists it is higher. Professing Christ in our culture makes little difference in sexual behavior or sexual preference. Our real problem is not really lower baptisms and lack of growth potential; our real problem is that we have reduced a relationship with Jesus to the lowest common denominator and it means nothing to us except that we have professed Him as Savior and participated in baptism but listen to our language, look at our lives and lifestyles and show me the difference. The Bible is clear: to know Jesus is to love Jesus and to love Jesus is to serve Jesus and to serve Jesus is to surrender to His Lordship and to submit to His sovereignty so that who He is as He is manifest through His Word shapes all that we are and do every day of our lives. We will never see a change in the church until we see a real and radical change in our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. And that change will not come so long as the source for understanding is within us; it will change only as we submit our lives to the absolute authority of this inerrant Word and listen to what it says. Let's do that for the next little while.

Jesus has come with His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It was quite a place. A seacoast city saturated with all kinds of people. It was a very appropriate setting for the question that He would ask, "what are the people saying about the Son of Man?" This question cuts two ways: what is the talk on the street about the One who is to come to save the world and to rule over it; what are they saying about me? Do they see me as that one or do they see me as some other? And they respond in two ways: Some think that He is the great prophet who was to precede the coming of the messiah while others see Him as a good preacher like Jeremiah or one of the others. But then He focuses the question for the disciples, 15. And it is in Peter's response that we begin to see what is so necessary for the church if we are to be who it is that Jesus wants us to be.

WE MUST FIRST KNOW THE FOUNDER OF THE CHURCH. Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." There is no way for us to be faithful in the church or to the church until we really know the founder of the church. Three truths are found in this proclamation of Peter. First, Peter calls Jesus "the Christ." It was the Greek term for the Jewish term mesheach or messiah. Peter says that Jesus is the historical fulfillment of everything that was prophesied about the one who would come to establish His reign upon the earth. To call Jesus the Christ is to acknowledge that He is the ruler of the world and the redeemer of sinners. He is the one about whom Isaiah spoke when He said, "the government shall be upon His shoulders," and He is the one about whom this same prophet was speaking when he said eight hundred years before Jesus was born,

“He was wounded for our transgressions, the chastisement that brought us peace was upon Him and with His stripes we are healed.” Calling Him the Christ is communicating that Jesus is the central focus and culminating conclusion of all of history.

Second, Peter says that He is the Son of God. This technical term refers to Jesus as the eternal one. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He is God who has come among us in the flesh. He is the first and the last. He is the alpha and the omega. He is the beginning and the end. He is the firstborn of all creation. He is the one who was before anything came to be and will be after all has passed away. Paul paints the picture this way in Colossians 1:15-20. Third, Peter says that Jesus is the one who is Living. The word that is used here reaches far beyond inhaling and exhaling; it is a very unique Greek word that is used only of God. It's intent is to bring before us the transformational character of Jesus. He is the one and the only one who brings us life and He does it by changing us from who we are toward who He wants us to be. Where there is no ongoing, increasing change of our lives in terms of our character, our conversation, and our conduct there is no conversion. Herein is a major problem in our churches. Most of our Baptist churches have more baptized unbelievers than baptized believers. We list twice as many members as we have active participants and thus make a mockery of the beautiful body of Christ. Our church believes in and practices meaningful membership; we also practice church discipline. That means that you cannot be a member of the body of believers at FBC Waynesboro without being an active participant. We have now almost an equivalent number between membership and Sunday School Attendance. And we do believe in correcting the saints when they veer off course. Listen: we will never be faithful as a church until we truly know the founder of the church.

But there is a second thing in this text here: WE MUST KNOW THE FOUNDER AND WE MUST GROW UPON THE FOUNDATION. We do not build the church. The church is the body of Christ. He is the head, the church is the body. He is the source, substance and sustenance of its life. The church does not belong to us. It belongs to Him. And we want Him to build it so that it brings glory to Him. That means that we want the church to grow upon the foundation that He lays down. That foundation is first the foundation of REVELATION, 17. Jesus blesses Peter because his confession did not come from within himself. He is a flawed human being. He is Peter the son of John. His confession came from God. It was revealed to Him. Now you and I are privileged to have the fullness and finality of the revelation of God right here in this book. It is all that we need for the being and doing as a church what God has called us to be and do. God

builds His church when we are faithful in holding fast to His Word in terms of what we believe and how we behave. We lay our lives under the authority of this Book and we study it daily and we come Sunday after Sunday to hear its truth unfolded for us. Here is yet another issue in our day: too many churches are doing too many things but preach and teach the Word of God. And many who preach and teach have turned into let me tickle your ears entertainers rather than preachers and teachers of the Word of God. Do you want to see God bless your church? Don't waste money on a bunch of how to grow your church in six easy steps. Read this book. Study this book. Pray this book. Preach and teach this book. Live this book. God will change your life and bless your church.

But the foundation is not just revelation, it is also redemption. God does not reveal Himself to us just for information but for transformation. He doesn't just want to communicate with us, He wants to change us. Listen to what Jesus says to Peter, 18. There are so many interpretations of what this verse means from Peter being the first bishop of the church and the forerunner of the Pope to Jesus building His church upon the confession that Peter communicated. But the Greek text is so clear in terms of what is meant. Elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is called the cornerstone or keystone of the church where He is not acknowledged and followed as Lord. The Bible also calls the apostles and prophets the foundation stones of the church, a reference to the Bible. There is no church where the authority of Scripture is not acknowledged as the sole and sufficient authority. But here Jesus establishes a contrast between Peter (petros) and Rock (petra). The first term though a name literally refers to little bitty pebbles. Nothing in and of themselves. The last term refers to a huge boulder, immovable, forceful, powerful. And Jesus reminds us that His church is build upon the foundation of Himself as Lord and the Word of God that is the source of life for the church but the church consists of little bitty rocks like you and be brought together by the grace of God and the Gospel living under the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture, and the gates of hell cannot overcome this church. She will survive. She will stand. She will win.

The church must know her founder and grow upon the sure foundation, and SHE MUST GO WITH FOCUS AND FORCE INTO HER WORLD, 18b-19. When the church decides to isolate and insulate herself from the world, she will become a nice sweet fellowship of folks who enjoy being together----all the way to death. Why do so many churches die in our day? Because they are not the church to begin with. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ can expect to be characterized by two realities: Spiritual warfare and the spread of the gospel. When the church gets outside her doors to deliver the Gospel to the world and to declare the Word of

God to the church, Satan is going to seek to destroy the church. You and I do not ever really know the reality of the devil until we start really living in devotion to Jesus. I have learned the reality of the demonic not through reading a book but through seeking to live a life of surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. And I have learned that some demons get elected as deacons! If you don't think the devil is in the church, start trying to be a church defined more by the Bible than by Baptist; by the Truth of God than by Tradition. You will find him. And he wears a religious mask.

Do you recognize that the church has only one mission outside the church? Inside the church we are to worship God and to learn His word and outside the church we are witnesses to the Gospel. The only reason God did not take us to heaven the moment He saved us was that He wants to use us as His witnesses. That is our work in the world. Every day. Every way. Anywhere. Any time. Jesus has given us His authority for this work. Imaged here as the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Or we could say the way of access into the Kingdom of God; that way of access is Jesus and Jesus alone. No other way. And we are given the authority to declare the Gospel in the anointing of the Holy Spirit so that when people respond with "yes" to Jesus they are in and when they say "no" they are out. And when we are doing this work, the only work given to the church; all hell will try to come against us. But Jesus gives us a promise: you do this work of declaring the Gospel as a church. Make this your focus and do it faithfully and the gates of hell will not prevail. Study this word for gates and you will discover that the gates are for protecting what is inside and those who exit the gates do so for war. Do you know what this means? Satan has the souls of thousands upon thousands even in the church and He doesn't want to go; he protects those who are held captive behind his gates sending out his sinister forces to fight those who would be faithful in declaring the only truth that can set people free from the grip of sin. He will try to stop you and stomp you when you are doing gospel work; that is why so many churches in our culture do so many things but the one thing we are called and commanded to do. And these churches are often full of people. But what kind of people?

Let me close. Here is our problem. Jesus comes to the end of this marvelous manifestation and tells these guys to keep quiet. Why? Because even though they have said the right words at the right time in the right way, Jesus knows that they really do not know who He is and thus are not yet truly committed to Him. Read on and you will see this is so. They will not know even as we do not know until the crucifixion and resurrection. Do you understand today that making a profession of faith does not save you? Being baptized does not save you? Going

to church does not save you? Rituals for righteousness do not save you? God saves you by His grace alone and the evidence that you are saved is a real and radically changed life where the depth of the desire of your heart is to live devotedly to and for Jesus alone and that is true because that is what God does when He saves us.

I love the church. She is not all that she could be or should be. One day she will be. But until then let's go on doing what God has called us to do for His glory until at last the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.