

RCC Anniversary Sunday

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
(Matthew 16:18 ESV)

I Will Build My Church

September 26th, 2021

Matthew 16:13-20

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! It is SO GOOD to be with you! Happy Anniversary! We are so excited for you and so thankful for your partnership and friendship in the ministry. This is a special day – but even with everything that is going on – the most special part of this day is the incredible privilege we have to open the Word of God together, so if you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to the Matthew 16:13-20.

This is good time to talk about the church – and this is a good time to hear something encouraging about the church. The church has been through a hard season and we could use a little good news right about now.

I facilitate a Private Pastors' Forum online where pastors can discuss and lament all things related to COVID out of the public eye and I created a poll asking pastors when they anticipated things getting back to normal. Specifically, when did they think that we would all be able to gather into one jam packed service, with no masks, no spacing and no safety protocols related to COVID19.

Do you know what the number 1 answer was in that poll?

July 2022.

One guy said that he only voted for July 2022 because it was the furthest date away that wasn't NEVER – meaning he thought my suggestion of July 2022 was actually overly OPTIMISTIC.

Now, since pastors aren't doctors or politicians I don't know whether that poll means anything at all – OTHER THAN that we're all a little depressed right now about the PROSPECTS for the church of Jesus Christ moving forward. We all FEEL as if it is going to be HARD and LONG and NASTY. In fact, in one of the other polls on the forum I asked pastors what has been the hardest part of this pandemic for them. I expected them to say keeping up with all the changing protocols or staffing the nursery or being unable to conduct a proper funeral – but do you know what the number 1 answer was?

The general tone and nastiness of Social Media.

Christians have LOST THEIR MINDS on the internet right now – how many of you know that? How many of you are contributing to that?

There is a spirit in the church that I haven't seen before. A spirit of anger and division and arrogance and impatience – it almost makes a person DESPAIR, doesn't it? It almost makes you wonder whether anyone is really saved out there, doesn't it? It almost makes you wonder if COVID19 has DEFEATED the church of Jesus Christ.

But let me assure you brothers and sisters – IT HAS NOT.

In the Providence of God it has PRUNED the church. It has SHAKEN the church. It has showed us where the cracks are – it has showed us where the cancer is – but it has not defeated the church of Jesus Christ.

It has not. It will not. It cannot.

How do I know that?

I know that because of the passage that lies open before us this morning. In this passage Jesus makes a bold promise and we're going to read it this morning and reflect upon how it may be furthered and advanced in our generation. I hope you have your Bible open now to Matthew 16:13-20. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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. (Matthew 16:13–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

My plan this morning is to ZOOM IN on verse 18. I want to park on that glorious promise: I will build my CHURCH!! And the gates of hell will not prevail against it! I want to get there – but in order to get there we have to make our way through a bit of a hermeneutical minefield – there are a few phrases and concepts in this passage that we will need to defuse, as it were, so that we can appreciate and appropriate this promise.

Clearing A Few Land Mines

Of course, the first one is fairly obvious. In the first half of verse 18 Jesus says to Simon:

I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

So Jesus gives SIMON a new nickname. He calls him Peter – or sometimes you will see that in your Bible as Cephas. People in that culture were generally multi-lingual to some extent so Cephas and Peter both mean ROCK – one in Aramaic and one in Greek. But what does it mean for Jesus to call Peter The Rock? First of all is it "the Rock", or is it simply "a Rock". That gets us right into the heart of the controversy. In the

passage itself Jesus says simply “on this rock” I will build my church. He doesn’t say THE ROCK in an exclusive sense – and in fact it would be weird if he did because in the bible Jesus is THE ROCK. Jesus is THE CORNERSTONE. Jesus in Matthew 21:42 said:

“Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? (Matthew 21:42 ESV)

He’s talking about himself there. He is saying I AM THE FOUNDATION STONE upon which the house of the Lord will be rebuilt. I AM THE ROCK. The church is built on JESUS! His person and work, his life and his death, his example and atoning sacrifice – praise the Lord!

So why does he refer to Peter as “this rock” as if he will somehow share in that?

And the answer is because he will – in a lesser and related sense. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:19-20 says that the church is:

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:19–21 ESV)

So according to Paul, Jesus is THE ROCK – the cornerstone – and the Apostles and Prophets in so far as they point to him, represent the foundation for the church as a whole. They are “rocks” – whereas only Jesus is “THE ROCK”.

And so, what Jesus is saying to Peter here in Matthew 16 is that he is the first stone laid in the larger Apostolic foundation. First in terms of sequence, not first in terms of authority. The authority in the early church appears to have been co-equal, in fact Paul tells of a time when he rebuked Peter to his face. He says in Galatians 2:11:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. (Galatians 2:11 ESV)

That was the time when Peter allowed himself to be intimidated by respected Jewish Christians into practicing a form of cultural separation from Gentile Christians – and in doing so he served to obscure the Gospel – and Paul rebuked him for it. So to be clear – contrary to our Roman Catholic friends, this passage in Matthew is not about establishing Peter as the Pope. What is said about Peter here is later said about all the Apostles. They are ALL part of the foundation of the church – with Christ as Cornerstone.

Ok – the next landmine is a little easier. Jesus says in verse 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.” (Matthew 16:19 ESV)

What does that mean?

Again, what Jesus is saying to the Apostles appears connected to what the Bible later says about him – and what Jesus says about himself. In Revelation 1:18 for example Jesus says:

“Fear not, I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” (Revelation 1:17–18 ESV)

So Jesus decides who gets loosed from hell and who gets let into heaven – he’s the Key Master; he’s the Binder and Looser - and in some sense he shares his keys with the Apostles – and with the church as a whole it seems. Flip forward a page to Matthew 18:15-18. There the bit about binding and loosing is repeated. We’ll just read verses 17-18 where Jesus is talking about the person who refuses to listen to the church. He says:

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:15–18 ESV)

That’s an incredible statement!

We spent a whole night in our B3 group wrestling with that statement. If you can think of a way for that to mean something other than what it appears to be saying, you come share that with me after service – because what it looks like Jesus is saying is that the church as a whole – in so far as it stands upon the Apostolic foundation – is involved somehow in the BINDING and LOOSING of souls!

Wow!

That’s a big view of the church! Jesus is talking about the church as if she is an embassy of the Kingdom of God – a portal even, leading from this world to the next. And of course, the devil wants to shut that portal down but here we are told that the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it – praise the Lord!

Alright, we’ve diffused the landmine, now let’s enjoy the promise that we’ve come to at the centre of the passage.

Taking Hold Of The Promise

Let me read it to you one more time. Jesus says to Simon – as the first of the Apostles to get there:

“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.” (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

Jesus says to Simon: “Welcome Peter! Your faith isn’t perfect but you are the first to confess the essence of the Christian faith - that I am the Christ, the Son of the Living God! You are now an Apostolic Witness to the Saviour and on this foundation I will BUILD MY CHURCH and the gates of HELL shall not prevail against it.”

Can you say amen to that?

Amen!

But you know what? This promise is actually far better than most of us have been led to believe. Most of us hear that as a promise of preservation. We hear Jesus saying that all hell is going to break loose. The demons are coming for us, but don’t worry because Jesus will never let us be totally defeated. HELL will not prevail against us.

But that is not what Jesus says.

Hear it again brothers and sisters. Jesus says:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

Whose GATES are being assaulted in that statement – hell’s or ours?

It hell’s gates that are under assault – which means we are advancing on it and this is Jesus saying: we’re going to win! Come HELL OR HIGH WATER – the church of Jesus Christ will ADVANCE, INCREASE and BE VICTORIOUS!

Can you say amen to that?

Amen!

This is a promise of GROWTH, HARVEST and INCREASE despite violent and demonic opposition. It is Jesus saying that by the grace he supplies, we will TAKE BACK what the enemy has stolen. We will plunder the devil and there is nothing he can do to stop us.

That’s the promise we are offered in this passage – and it ought to give us tremendous hope – and we need a little bit of hope right now because we are living in a time of PRUNING and APPARENT DECLINE.

Let me unpack that for you.

How many of you know that GOD is committed to the difficult and painful business of ensuring the long-term fruitfulness of his covenant people? We should know that because Jesus SAYS that in John 15:1-2. He says:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” (John 15:1–2 ESV)

So according to this passage, the Father TAKES AWAY – he ordains subtractions from the church. Our grandparents used to call these “blessed subtractions”. They were talking about people in the church who needed either to be woken up or shaken out because they were not bearing fruit and they did not appear to be authentically converted. They weren’t doing anything that seemed to justify discipline but they were just AROUND, UNDER FOOT, DOING NOTHING, CONSTANTLY COMPLAINING and OBSCURING our witness and testimony.

No pastor – no elder - is insightful enough or skilful enough to deal with such people – we can’t tell whether they’re in or out - so every once in a while God himself comes along and he beats the tree with a stick and if they aren’t connected then they fall away and the tree is healthier and stronger as a result.

That’s blessed subtraction and there has been a fair bit of it in the church over the last 18 months.

Now, to be clear, I’m not talking about weak sheep who need some help making their way back to church, I’m talking about non-Christians – unsaved folks – who were hanging around but who were never actually abiding in Christ. According to Jesus, those are the people who from time to time, the Father comes along and takes away.

It is traumatizing in the short term – and life giving in the long term but while it's happening it creates the appearance of DECREASE and DECLINE.

That's what we're going through now. In one of the polls on that Pastors' Forum I mentioned, I asked pastors what percentage of their pre-COVID congregation has returned from the trauma of this pandemic. The average in Canada so far is just over 50%. That's in evangelical churches - in the mainline church the numbers are considerably worse.

So it LOOKS LIKE the church is shrinking – but is it? Or were we simply over counting the number of TRUE SHEEP we had in our flocks to begin with?

You see, real believers were not blown away by COVID19. Real believers aren't blown away by anything. When God shakes the tree, the dead wood falls off and the connected branches burst into bloom.

That's what is going on in this season. This PRUNE – this BLESSED SUBTRACTION that we are seeing in the wider evangelical church – this is not a RETREAT this is a RENEWAL. This is the end of something and the beginning of something. I've said this to many people over the last 6 months: I think the next 10 years are going to be the hardest we've ever lived through as Christians – and the 10 years after that are going to see the greatest harvest in the history of the church in Canada.

Now, you might quibble with me on the numbers, but I don't see how you can argue with the general trajectory. According to Jesus, we may have some brief setbacks, we may face some severe headwinds, we may go through some shallow valleys – but the overall trajectory here is UP, UP, UP over time.

Jesus is going to build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

So – how is this all likely to work out?

Thinking Through Application And Advance

I want to spend our last few minutes thinking through the future advance of the church. How will it happen? How did Jesus SAY that it would happen? The first answer to that question, I would argue is this:

1. By being salt and light

In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said:

“You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

In Matthew 5:14 he said:

“You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:14 ESV)

So Jesus said that we are supposed to be VISIBLY DIFFERENT from the world. Different but accessible, that's the strategy – and according to Jesus if we do this it will result in other people joining us in the worship of the Lord. He said that in Matthew 5:16:

“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

So when we DO US – when we ARE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANS – people out there, living in the dark, SEE US and they want to BE LIKE US and they want to JOIN WITH US in the worship of the Lord.

Listen, brothers and sisters, the Christian life, properly lived according to the teachings and example of Jesus – IS BEAUTIFUL and COMPELLING and ATTRACTIVE. It is the fragrance of life among those who are perishing. We need to recapture that! We need to re-estimate that! We have dramatically underappreciated the evangelistic benefit of a well lived, public Christian life.

Now of course, the flip side of this principle is that when the church loses that – when the church looks and acts exactly like the world, she is absolutely useless. Jesus said:

“if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

So when “church people” are just as rude, just as crass, just as foolish, just as harsh and unmerciful as the people in the world – when we look, sound, act, post and Tweet just like everybody else on Social Media – then WE ARE CRYING OUT FOR JUDGMENT AND CHASTISEMENT from the Lord. According to the Bible, this is the canary in the coalmine. This is how you know catastrophe is coming.

In Ezekiel 11 just before a pronouncement of SEVERE chastisement upon the covenant community, God told people WHY he was about to treat them the way he was going to treat them; he said:

“For you have not walked in my statutes, nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you.” (Ezekiel 11:12 ESV)

That’s the point of no return, as far as God is concerned! He absolutely cannot let that slide, so when he sees it starting to happen, when worldly patterns and behaviours start to find a home in our hearts, then he HAS TO ACT for the sake of his glory and for the sake of our future utility.

Are you FEELING THAT brothers and sisters?

Can you hear the footsteps of our Father coming up the stairs to apply parental discipline to his people?

Oh man, I’m feeling it – I’m hearing that - and I have a sense that we’ll be living through that for the next several years.

It’s discipline time, friends, and we have no one but ourselves to blame. We could have conducted our own reformation 30 years ago when we saw this happening but we didn’t and so now we have to take our medicine. But the good news is that God is an excellent parent. He’s going to sort us out and we will recover our distinctiveness and witness. We will be salt and light again in this culture – I believe that - because Jesus promised that. He said that our light would INCREASE – he said that our mission would succeed, and the gates of hell would not prevail against us – praise the Lord!

Secondly, based on the things that Jesus himself said, we expect this increase to happen:

2. Through patient endurance and consistent focus

Turn back a couple of pages to Matthew 10:16-23. I don't think we have time to read the whole passage but have it open and let me at least hit the highlights. In verse 16 Jesus says:

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

So just because we win in the end, doesn't mean it will be all sunshine and roses. Nope. Expect to be bitten, expect to be harassed. Expect hard times. But don't allow yourselves to become hard – don't become angry, don't let the battle out there change you. Stay innocent as doves. Drop down now to verse 21:

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death,²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:16–23 ESV)

So – expect division, expect hostility, expect betrayal – BUT STAY ON MISSION!! Don't fight back, don't get sucked in to their culture wars, just PREACH THE GOSPEL and move on!

I love that – in verse 23 Jesus says: "If a city turns against you – don't FIGHT them! Don't try to take back the city! Just go somewhere else. You won't run out of people to evangelize before the time of my return."

Isn't that brilliant!

How many of us are trying to TAKE BACK THE CITY – whereas Jesus told us TO GO ON WITH THE MISSION!!

Oh friends, I am so tired of culture warriors and freedom fighters! Jesus promised that we would be subject to mistreatment. He said that we would preach through closing doors. He didn't tell us to burn down those doors – he told us to move on and keep working.

Are you hearing that church?

Christians ABSORB abuse. Christians endure mistreatment – but like soldiers on a special mission we don't get entangled in civilian affairs – we DO OUR JOBS!!! There are people who need to be evangelized before Jesus comes back so we need to get on with it.

The church grows when we get on with it. When we just patiently endure everything the world can throw at us and like the Energizer Bunny, we just keep going. And so the harder it gets out there, the brighter our light shines.

And then lastly, according to Jesus, the church is going to grow:

3. By going into all the world to make disciples

You know, one of the interesting things about this pandemic is that it has been harder to make an impact LOCALLY – because of all the restrictions – but easier to make an impact globally. The pandemic forced churches to figure out how to use the internet. We had to move everything online – for our people – but now all those resources are being used by our brothers and sisters overseas. And the pandemic forced us to

shut down most of our in-house programs for months and months at a time - and that saved us a truckload of money – money that we have the opportunity now to send overseas.

Listen, sometimes, trouble or oppression in one place is Providentially ordained to drive people and resources into another place. If you are a Bible reader you know this. In Acts 8 the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem, in the Providence of God, actually served to launch the first great missionary movement in the history of the Christian church. A door closed here, so they moved people and money through a window over there.

Are you seeing that?

Because some Christians are spending so much time kicking at the closing door that they've missed their opportunity with the open window.

My dear brothers and sisters, don't let anything distract you from the task of global mission. Right now, in the church of Jesus Christ in North America, we need a little less revolution and a little more redirection – because there is a great deal of work yet to be done in this world.

Are you with me on that?

Because Jesus is with us on that.

He didn't promise to be with us in our political agitations, he didn't promise to be with us in our scramble for privilege and power – but he did promise to be with us in our pursuit of the Great Commission. He said:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19–20 ESV)

Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.