

WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS?

Matthew 16:13-20 Text: vs. 15 *"But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

Last week I asked you what answer you would give to the question Jesus put to His disciples, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Would you also say, He was one of the prophets? An angel? The Messiah, the Son of the living God? What would you say? Well, Simon Peter answered *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* And Jesus replied, *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."* Then Jesus stated His belief in the disciples when He said to Peter, *"On this rock, I will build my church."*

Belief is the key here! When Jesus showed the disciples He believed in *them*, they reacted by establishing many churches throughout the Middle East and Europe. He set a standard they could reach. So, they went into all the world teaching and preaching about Him. But unfortunately, today's empty churches have become a symbol of how powerful secularism has become in our world. You see, secularism doesn't seek to destroy religion. It just defines religion as something that's private. Something that's just between you and God. Religion has no place in public or social life. So, in a secular world, religion and faith are treated as the private possession of an individual. You can do it at home, alone. Or go out fishing. Or on a golf course. In America today, most people accept a secularized, watered-down version of the Christian faith.

George Gallup tells us every year that Americans are among the most religious people in the world. An overwhelming majority say they believe in God. They believe the Bible is the word of God. They believe Jesus is God's son. But that's about it! That's all! It's a secularized version of faith. A lot of people view church as an option for those who need that sort of thing! And in our secularized society, the church is dying. A monument to the past. Although interest in religion seems to be on the rise, attendance at church is on the decline.

Thomas Reeves, a University of Wisconsin professor of history wrote a book titled *The Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore?* He said that since the 1960's every traditional Christian denomination has lost between one-third and one-fifth of its membership. Episcopalians. Methodists. Lutherans. Baptists. Mainline Protestants were a majority of Protestants in the United States until the mid-20th century. A dip in membership across all Christian denominations has been more pronounced among the mainline groups, with the result that mainline groups no longer comprise the majority.

The *average* Christian church today is composed of *less than* one hundred people. Total! And the church is getting older and smaller every year. The average church today is only reaching *one* new person *per year* with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Many say the 21st century has become *the dawn of a post-denominational era* moving beyond the Protestant majority that flourished over the last five hundred years.

Many traditional Christian denominations are closing their doors. Reeves believes the reason why this is happening among mainline denominational churches is that many of their leaders have rejected the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. The Rt. Rev. John Shelby Spong was bishop of the Episcopal Church of Newark, New Jersey and wrote in one of his many books that as he looked at the *Apostle's Creed*, which we just said this morning, and which since the 2nd century has been a summary of the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the only part Spong could in good conscience still confess, were the words - *"I believe."*

And if you want to hear something that will really keep you awake, when you go to bed tonight, eight Christian churches in America will have closed their doors, *for good!* And as you hopefully drift off to sleep, more than 7,600 *professing* Christians in North America and Europe will leave the Christian church. Gone *forever!* *"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."*

In our lesson this morning, Peter had just confessed with those words his faith that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Jewish Messiah. And Jesus had approved Peter's confession by making a *pun* about Peter's name. In Greek, his name means "rock" – *Petros*. And that was the main statement upon which Jesus would build His church. Peter, himself, wasn't actually a "rock." What Jesus was calling the "rock" upon which He would build His Church was Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. That statement of Peter is what Jesus would *build* His Church upon. But it would be three hundred years after Jesus said that, that the very first church building would be built. And the word *build* as used here, means to build a building. Something like a tower or a temple. Not a mall or a custom-made home. It was a Church.

And today when you hear the word *"church"* you picture a physical building, like this one in which you are sitting here on the circle in Everglades City. But the word *"church"* used here doesn't have anything to do with an actual building. It means *an assembly of people* who gather for a purpose. And the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ. A cornerstone is a stone at the corner of a building. An important stone. It's *"the basic part of something."* And the church's *foundation* were the apostles and prophets. Their writings have given us the sixty-six books of the Bible. 1 Peter tells us that our lives, as followers of Jesus Christ, are *living stones*. Think of them as *bricks*. God is building those bricks upon the foundation of Christ and the Bible. Our Christian lives are the living bricks. And these living

bricks, the church, having been rescued from the fires of hell to break down the gates of hell and reach the hearts of men and women with the Good News of Christ's love. And inviting people to become a part of the church shows that Jesus Christ is still building His church!

Ninety-seven years ago, in 1926, God blessed this *church on the circle* with growth. Not because of me, or any of the former pastors, but because Jesus is building His church. He's the One who brings growth. He's the One who rescues people from the gates of hell. He's the One who uses lives as living stones to build on the Foundation He's laid. It's not my church. Or your church. It's Jesus Christ's church, of which ECC is but one congregation among many. And we need to remember, we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. I have yet to meet a Christian who has a vibrant, New Testament Christian life apart from being part of a local church, trying to live alone the Christian life.

Listen, we are one body! God has given to each member of His body, the church, spiritual gifts, and abilities to contribute to the work of the church. That means every member of every church is a minister. And God has a place for you to serve as the visible presence of Jesus Christ in the world. We are to do what Jesus began when He gave sight to the blind. We are to be telling people the Good News that sets free those who are prisoners to sin. We are to be the Church as a Family.

We're called "*The Friendly Little Church on the Circle in Everglades City.*" That's exactly what Jesus told his followers the key would be to their effectiveness as a community. Love each other! Speak kindly to each other. And that as they loved each other, the rest of the world would come to have faith in Him. That's why the early Christians called each other *brothers and sisters*. We are family! That's why our relationship with each other reveals our dedication to Jesus. It's when we live as a community, a family, that our relationships become our priority. Then the Church becomes a healthy community that will offset secularism. The church should be at the center of what God is doing in our community. Nations will fall. Governments will fail. Trends will end. Buildings will crumble. Political parties will lose their influence. But the gates of hell will not overcome Jesus Christ's church!

If ECC will stay strong as a group of committed Christians, devoted to Jesus Christ, and submitted to the authority of the Bible, ECC is going to be a part of what God planned. And three words picture just how central the church is to the Christian faith. *Building. Body. Family.* Those three words picture expansion and growth. Whether it's a *building* with new bricks being added to it to withstand the storms of hell. Or whether it's a *body* with new parts transplanted to live as Jesus Christ's physical presence in our world. Or whether it's a *family* where we grow in love with each other. If we don't do that, our nation will become thoroughly secularized, confused, and lost, despite its claim of religious belief.

On the 8th of December 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood before the assembled houses of Congress and gave the greatest speech of his presidency. He called the previous day's events at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 "*a deliberate and unprovoked attack upon the People of the United States by the Empire of Japan.*" Near the end of that speech, President Roosevelt said, "*No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people, in their righteous might, will win through to absolute victory.*" Righteous might! We, the Assembled People of God, must use that *righteous might* Jesus Christ gave us.

Building any church is a marathon. It's not a sprint. It takes hard work. It takes prayer, teamwork, assessment, trial-and-error, leadership, stability, faith, trust, love. And above all, time. Lots of time. There's no shortcut to building a church. We've been doing it right here for 76 years, because we believe *righteous might* will give us the strength to overcome death and the powers of evil. So, can you now say, "*You, Jesus, are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" I pray to God that you will do it, so God will help us. AMEN.