

Built on the Rock
Sunday Pentecost 12, Year A
Isaiah 51: 1 – 6; Romans 11: 33 – 12:8; Matthew 16: 13 – 20
August 23, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I love our hymn of the day, “Built on the Rock” (LSB 645). Use the words of that hymn as a devotion this week. Ponder it. It is a beautiful testament to who we are as the Church and what is done here in His house.

The Church was also one of the topics we discussed in our Wednesday, “Lutheran Perspective on Christianity” class.

The topic of “the Church” has been one of great importance this year, as many churches, like ours, were shut down for a while, as the world struggled to understand the viral threat and how to deal with it. Many churches went ‘virtual’ and had Bible studies, worship, etc. online. Some still are, just as we are.

But, do online services truly count as ‘Church’? What is ‘Church’?

Certainly, Jesus, nor the Apostles, ever talked about online worship. I guess the internet hadn’t made it to the Middle East yet. ☺

But, Jesus, and the Apostles, do give us much to work with, when defining the Church.

First, we can go to the word itself; church. That word is only used twice in any of the Gospels, and both are in the Gospel of Matthew. One of those times is today.

The Greek word for church is ‘ἐκκλησία’. And, ‘ἐκκλησία’ is a compound word, meaning it is two words put together. The first word is ‘ἐκ’ which means ‘out’ or ‘away from’. Very much like our ‘exit’. That’s an easy way to remember the word... ἐκ ... ἐκxit

The second is, ‘καλεω’. Which means to call or summon. Again, very much like it sounds ‘καλεω’ = call.

So, we put the two words together and we get “to call out”.

The Church is called out...summoned.

But, what is it that summons us. What calls us?

Simply put, it is the confession of faith, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

As the Church, the body, we are called, gathered and enlightened by the testimony that Jesus is the Christ. A gathering without that confession, is not the Church. Period. If Christ is not central, then it is not Church.

This is why I love our liturgy, it keeps us in our place and Christ in the center. Our service is all about Christ, His promises, His gifts, His love, His Word. Through our worship, we confess Christ.

When Jesus asked the disciples who people said He was, they responded with all kinds of answers; John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.

The people of Israel had been expecting one of the prophets to return to them. Especially, they expected Elijah. So, the list they give is not surprising.

We see this same thing in many places of worship today where Jesus is a cheerleader, a mascot, a role model, and many other things.

But, Jesus, changes the question for His disciples; not, *"who do people say that I am,"* but, rather, *"who do YOU say that I am?"*

And, Peter, by the grace of God, gives us the correct answer, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* 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. 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"*

(Matthew 16:13-18).

Jesus is very apparently very surprised and very happy with Peter's answer! "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!" That is the equivalent of having your full name recited. I remember when I was young, when my mom would say my full name, it was definitely because she was excited about something I had done, but usually not for a good reason.

But, here, Jesus is very happy. Finally, someone recognizes Him. He isn't the promised prophet, but the promised Messiah! He isn't a son of God, but THE Son of God!

And, it is that proclamation that has been the foundation of the Church! ON that rock the church is built. Built on the Rock the Church shall Stand...

The Church continues to stand. Not because she is strong, or beautiful, or resilient. No she is often, beaten and bruised, battered and bloodied. But, just as we have sung, "*Built on the Rock the Church shall stand, Even when steeples are falling. Crumbled have spires in ev'ry land; Bells still are chiming and calling, Calling the young and old to rest, But above all the souls distressed, Longing for rest everlasting*" (LSB 645, st. 1).

Built on the rock, the church will stand, even when buildings crumble, governments fall, wars oppress, pandemics stop worship, our bodies fail to allow us to attend any longer... Because the Church is built on the rock of that confession, "*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*"

In fact, St. John writes at the end of his Gospel, that the whole purpose of his writing was this, "*but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31).

This confession is the foundation of our faith. It gives the Church her identity. We are followers of Christ. We are Christians. We are summoned by Him. He has called out to us. And, so, we gather.

We gather with other sinners. We gather with our fellow adulterers, thieves, gossips, liars, drunkards, and hypocrites. We listen to a fallen and broken man proclaim the truths of God. We endure his terrible dad jokes. We accept wearing masks in worship. We come forward in groups for the Lord's Supper, even while there is a perfectly good rail around the altar. Why? **Because, even when Church isn't the Church we want, we want the Church we got.** We want Jesus and what He has for us. Our 'church' isn't perfect. Our shepherd here isn't perfect. Our brothers and sisters here with us aren't perfect. And, believe it or not, we aren't perfect, either. So, we struggle together.

"For as in one body we have many members," says St. Paul this morning, "and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:4-8).

Do we get mad at each other? Sure, we do. Do we disagree with the pastor? Trust me, it happens. Do we want worship our way? Yes, I hear it often. We want to shape our worship instead of letting our worship shape us.

But, one thing that will not change, one thing that will not crumble, one thing that will not fail, is our confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and no one, not even the Devil himself, can take that from us.

And you better believe that we are at war. At war with that ancient serpent, the Devil. At war with a fallen world. At war with the sinfulness in each other and in ourselves.

The section that our Hymn of the Day is in, is titled The Church Militant. For that is what we are; the Church at war.

We are the Church militant. Armed, not with the guns and bombs, but with something far more powerful. We have something that is more secret than the stealth bomber, more covert than the CIA. We have something that can shatter the darkness of a fallen and broken world. The God of Sabaoth, which means, the God of armies, has equipped us with an almost devious weapon. Devious because the world does not see it coming and does not know how to deal with it. Yet, it brings them to their knees. It is nothing else than forgiveness. And forgiveness only comes through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus said, *“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”*.

This is the weapon that He has given to His Church.

If you think about it, no other entity on earth has the power to offer the forgiveness of God the way the Church does. Not the government. Not the state. Not a judge or magistrate. NO ONE.

But, every Sunday, we hear this most powerful truth from our pastor, *“In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.”* In the place of and by the order of my Commander Jesus the King. This is what the Small Catechism calls the Office of the Keys. Or, what we call Confession and Absolution.

The world doesn't understand that. We are kooks. We are crazy. They certainly won't understand it if you live in that forgiveness. If you take it with you when you leave today. If you go and distribute it. The fallen world expects vengeance, justice, hate, equality and fairness.

Mercy and grace is foreign to them. Peace with God is something they work for, but will never attain.

And, so, we go to war. Not wielding swords and guns, but mercy and forgiveness, as St. Paul says, “*For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds*” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

So, what is the Church? It is those called out and summoned by the Holy Spirit, built upon the profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, professed in both Word and Sacrament and proclaimed to the world.

“Grant, then, O God, Your will be done, That, when the church bells are ringing, Many in saving faith may come Where Christ His message is bringing: “*I know my own; My own know Me. You, not the world, My face will see. My peace I leave with you. Amen*” (LSB 645, st. 5).

*Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.*