

I. Set Up to include reading Matthew:16: 13-20

II. Introduction:

A. 23 years ago this week, Sheri and I – and our three boys, who were 12, 8 and 4 at the time - rolled into town.

B. We had been living in Washington State for fourteen years.

1. During the first half we'd worked in college ministry. During the second I'd been a management consultant. The call here was shocking – at least to me. I did not see it coming.

2. If you have been in full-time ministry and you get out, you discover two things that are hard to give up: weekends and money. But I heard the voice of God as clearly as I ever had saying, “move to Chicago and take this job” and so we did.

3. I joined the staff of this church on a part time basis. The plan was keep some clients but work part time here. Bob – a friend – was the senior pastor at the time. He said he planned to stay in that spot for another fifteen years. Plans change. He left after three.

C. Twenty years ago started as Senior pastor. I share that to say, I looked back over twenty years of fall sermons. They have been based on all kinds of texts and they have been framed in all kinds of ways, but they are always some version of the football talk. I call it that after Vince Lombardi, who famously started the season explaining the game of football in the most basic terms – to a group of men who had been playing the game for twenty years.

D. In some way, shape or form I have given a talk explaining what we are doing here – or at least what we are supposed to be doing here.

E. To be clear, I do not give the same talk – at some point, even those of you who do not pay close attention to what I say would figure that out, “Is he recycling his sermons?”

1. For starters, it's not always been one talk - sometimes it's been four talks.

2. And there have been a variety of texts and approaches.

a) I've used the first question of the Westminster Catechism – what is the chief aim of man?

b) I've used Matthew 28 - Great Commission and Mark 12 - the Great Commandment and Micah 6 (what does the Lord require of you) and Acts 2 to talk about the basics. To answer the question, "what are we doing here?"

3. I have done this because: 1) to me, September is the real start of the year; and 2) we need to continually regroup because vision leaks or mission creeps or there is some confusion about the basics.

F. Today is the 21st verse of the same song.

G. As you saw, next week is One Church | One Day. Last year was a great event. You don't want to miss it. And if you have not been baptized, this is a great opportunity to make that commitment

H. Today I want to give the 21st version of the "This is a Football" speech. What are we doing here? How do we win. To that end we look to Matthew 16. Jesus and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, when he them a question. In many ways it is the question: who is Jesus. What are we going to do about Jesus?

I. **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** What is the word on the street? What the result of the latest tracking poll?

J. He hears: **Some say John the Baptist. Others Elijah. Some others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.**

K. Clearly, the supernatural aspects of Christ's ministry has people talking, but there is no clear agreement on who He is. So then he asks, **"But who do you say that I am?"**

L. Peter – the self-appointed and unofficial leader, who is typically the first to speak and, consequently, the one most likely to say something stupid, to get it wrong and to get in trouble – says, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."**

1. This is the perfect answer. In fact, it is so spot on that Jesus says, "You didn't get that on your own."

2. My senior year in high school I had a calculus class. I'm not sure why. The next calculus problem I do in real life will be the first I have ever done. And I was a very average student in calculus, so when I came up with the answer to an extra credit problem one day.

3. That answer was too good // Andy Axup, Tracy, Steve

M. 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.

1. As an aside, let’s note that in spite of what some people say, Jesus did claim to be the Messiah and God. It happens in all kinds of ways, here is one of them. And this is why he was put to death.

N. So, he says: Yes, yes, yes. That answer was so spot on I know you got it from Heaven. And then He goes on to say something profound about the church: **And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.**

III. There is a lot going on here, and there has been a lot of discussion about this text. Tragically:

A. In some circles all the attention ends up focused on what he says about founding his church on the rock (*petros*). There are Protestant and Catholic interpretations here. I am very much in the Protestant camp here. I believe that the church is based on Christ. That He is our cornerstone and I think Peter would agree. Not our focus today.

B. A second misdirection around this passage comes out of people’s misunderstanding of “the gates of hell.” Jesus says he is going to build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. They think this means we are safe when that is not the imagery at all. The point is, evil loses. The gates of hell cannot withstand the offensive attack of the church. We are not playing defense. We are not being told that the walls protecting the church will withstand the attacks of evil. We are being told that the church will kick down the gates protecting hell. God wins. Good triumphs.

C. What I want to focus on is a third aspect of this passage – and it’s the main one. Jesus forms a movement - the church. This is the first time the idea ever appears. The first time he names it.

1. Building off of the idea that He is the Messiah and that He is on a mission to reclaim and restore all that belongs to His Father, Jesus announces that he is gathering his people together; He is forming an army, and advance team, he is organizing and uniting all those who are with him to help Him do what he has been sent to do. He is starting now to shape a community of people who are going to be part of his family, his movement. And He uses the word church.

2. I want to make a very specific point today – God has a plan. He is going to reclaim and reconstitute God’s kingdom. One based on grace and love not selfish power. An eternal kingdom that reflects His vision and values. One in which sin and evil are no more. And we have an opportunity to be a part of it. We have an opportunity to invest in it.

D. Now, normally the point I make here – at the start of the years - is that Jesus has a mission and to that end, he founds a church.

1. We talk about the church having a mission. I think that's a bit backwards. I think it's better to talk about the mission of God having a church.
2. The church is not what is ultimately important. God is. And we exist to fulfill his plan. At this point I often talk about our call to Proclaim the Good News AND engage in Good Works, and I make a point about the word AND.
3. Some local churches – congregations - are all about the proclamation but not the good works. Some are all about the good works but not the proclamation. At this point I will often argue that we are expected to be engaged in both. We want to reach people and renew communities.

E. Today I want to emphasize a different point. A somewhat unpopular one – we are linked together by God's plan – and we are expected to do this together.

1. In an era when institutions of all types are being undermined - read Yuval Levin's book, *A Time to Build* in which he explains how people are placing themselves ahead of the institutions they serve. In this era we are expected to be shaped by institutions.
2. In an era where individualism is going to such extremes that we now expect that we get to define truth – to define reality. That the world and others will conform to our goals because we are in charge – we get called into a web of relationships where we are not in charge.
3. In an era where leadership scandals have rocked the integrity of the church.

F. In this setting and at this moment I am pointing you back to what Jesus laid out as his plan. I am actually highlighting two things:

1. We are called together around his mission. We do not get to define the church. It's not our idea, it is his. And Jesus is the head of the church. It is his definition that matters. His mission. His plan. the church is us huddled around Jesus and his plan.
2. And, His plan will carry the day. He wins.

G. I want to emphasize the first point, so let me quickly say a few things about the second. God wins. Jesus will return as King and judge. We need to order our life around this certain truth.

1. This has been a hard couple weeks – a lot of people in crisis. A lot of people facing a lot of set backs and bad news and disappointments.

a) On several occasions I have retreated into my office, closed the door and cried. In the previous twenty years that has happened maybe two other times.

2. A big part of the way through this for me is to settle myself around the truth that this ends well in Christ. These set backs are temporary.

a) What we see is not all there is – indeed, in this world you will have trouble. In this world you will face trials.

b) This is the land of the dying. We get to leave it behind and go to the land of the living. In Christ we get eternal life.

3. When I am frustrated by the pain and sorrow and suffering I am reminded that none of this surprises God and He sent his Son to fix things. And they will be fixed. And we are told to invest in that life.

a) To live today in light of eternity. To store up treasure in heaven.

b) Paul said, “to live is Christ and to die is gain,” and he only decided to stick around for .

H. Men and women, you are going to live after you die. Now is the time to invest in what is ahead. How do you do that, by following Christ. By embracing his call, his vision, his

1. If you’ve not read the last few chapters of the book, please do.

2. He wins. It’s a settled event. When Christ died on the cross the victory was won. The outcome is certain. God wins. Good wins. Light wins. Love wins.

3. If you know Christ you are on the winning team. We need to live in light of that certainty.

IV. This is a big point and so it is often the one I underline, but I want to highlight a different point today. It’s not what Jesus commissioned his followers to do. It is that He commissioned his followers to do it together. To work together. To be together. The together piece is not a small part of his plan.

A. You’ve heard this from me – a lot. Over the years I have I pushed Small Groups and talked about 2 AM friends.

- B. I have noted that we were made in the image of a God who has always existed in the perfect fellowship of himself – one God in three persons.
- C. I have recited the “one another passages” – noting that we are to: love one another, pray for one another, carry one another's burdens
- D. I've noted that when Jesus summarized the law, he did so in two parts. We are to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength and we are to love others (our neighbor) as ourselves
- E. I've noted that one of the amazing things about the early church was that, “They devoted themselves to one another.”
- F. I have made the point that in the Bible the word “saints” is always plural, that Jesus teaches us to pray "Our Father" not "My Father:” that Paul uses the phrase, "our Lord" 53 times, & "my Lord" only 1 time.
- G. I have cited Paul's teaching that members of the church are members of one body. In Romans 12:5 we read: **In Christ we who are many form one Body, and each member belongs to all the others.** This is the origin of the idea that we can be a part of something.
- H. I have talked about visiting hospital rooms full of people and those without anyone.
- V. To be clear, this is Jesus's plan, not ours. And it is not universally popular.
- A. If you pick up *The Wall Street Journal* you can read about all of the companies struggling to get people back into an office.
1. I was talking to the CEO of an international company this week. And he noted that we are in a big, long term experiment about trying to run things remotely – and that some were fighting it, like Jamie Dimon, but people didn't want to be back in the office.
- B. I understand that Starbucks has changed their thinking. When Howard Schultz started it, it was to be this third space – not work or home but a place of community where people could meet and engage with one another. But Starbucks now thinks what people want is not community but convenience, and so they have pivoted more to Drive Thru's than gathering places.
- C. Peggy Noonan recently noted that America is looking more and more like an Edward Hopper painting.

1. He was the great artist of American loneliness--empty streets, tables for one, everyone at the bar drinking alone.
2. She laments this, writing, “we weren't meant to be a Hopper painting. We were meant to be and work together.”

VI. I come back to this point. I am calling you to think about community – to invest in community, to sacrifice for community:

- A. Because we are called to it in Scripture.
- B. I have come back to this because, as a pastor I see it’s the only way a church over about 25 people works. You need people caring for each other.
- C. I have come back to this because life is better in community / with friends. Friends divide our struggles and multiply our joy.
- D. I come back to this point because I see people withdrawing. I see people losing their ability to be around people. Losing their ability to show up in an office.
- E. I have come back to this because I hear people saying, “I’ve decided I like to be alone. Life is easier alone.”

VII. To be clear, in some ways, you can withdraw.

A. One of the big downsides of our affluence is that on a very practical level – not an emotional or spiritual level, but at a practical and physical level – for a season, many of us don’t need other people.

1. We earn enough money to buy whatever we need; We can get by on our own or with the help of people we hire; We can insulate ourselves from each other.

B. But at the end of the day we can’t buy what we really need, and that is to be in community with other people who also:

1. Trust Christ and want to become more like Him
2. And who want to see others changed as well.

C. Having that kind of connection we are called to is a choice that we have to make – and it will not always be convenient.

D. I don’t know what level of connection you have this morning

1. If you need to take the first step and belong to the universal church – place your faith in Christ
2. Or if you are at the second step and need to commit to coming regularly to the church
3. Or if you are at the third step and need to move into more intentional community by finding a small group, joining a team to serve or taking some other kind of step.

a) There is a level of community that is not going to happen in this room.

(1) You can be civil with a few hundred people. You can be courteous. You can sing with and smile at very large groups. But you can't share your life or your burdens.

(1) That requires a smaller group

E. There are no quick fixes here. The kind of friends we want and need take time to develop.

F. Wherever you are, know that we want you to have a sense of belonging. A sense that you are called and placed in this family by God and that you play an integral part in it.

VIII. There is a second part of this message coming in a few weeks -

A. Let me be clear, community is hard. It is inconvenient. Real people have problems and issues. Imaginary friends – like imaginary gods and imaginary spouses and imaginary children – behave as expected. They don't surprise us.

B. The call to leave home and be with real people around a mission other than our own is easier. But it's not what Jesus calls us to.

C. The good news is, we are in this together. The bad news is, we are in this together – and that is getting harder and harder than before.

D. But it is the way forward.

IX. I will have more to say about all of this in the weeks and months ahead. Right now let me say, it starts with the commitment to be shaped by Jesus and the Gospel, and so we turn there again, and come to this table .

X.

XI.

A. .

B.

We have been conditioned to go. It's part of America. It's called capitalism. If there's a better offer if you can be happier somewhere else if someone gives you a better option then go that's for free market thank you Brendon. Challenge is a can't make new old friends you made for relationships we need to cultivate community we have a lot of people who do not have much by way of community right now

XII. Get to Know Thy Neighbor

It's sexy among young people—my generation—to talk about ditching institutional religion and starting a revolution of real Christ-followers living in real community without the confines of church. Besides being unbiblical, such notions of churchless Christianity are unrealistic. It's immaturity actually, like the newly engaged couple who think romance preserves the marriage, when the couple celebrating their golden anniversary know it's the institution of marriage that preserves the romance. Without the God-given habit of corporate worship and the God-given mandate of corporate accountability, we will not prove faithful over the long haul.

What we need are fewer revolutionaries and a few more plodding visionaries. That's my dream for the church—a multitude of faithful, risktaking plodders. The best churches are full of gospel-saturated people holding tenaciously to a vision of godly obedience and God's glory, and pursuing that godliness and glory with relentless, often unnoticed, plodding consistency.

Until we are content with being one of the million nameless, faceless church members and not the next globe-trotting rock star, we aren't ready to be a part of the church. In the grand scheme of things, most of us are going to be more of an Ampliatus ([Rom. 16:8](#)) or Phlegon (v. 14) than an apostle Paul. And maybe that's why so many Christians are getting tired of the church. We haven't learned how to be part of the crowd. We haven't learned to be ordinary. Our jobs are often mundane. Our devotional times often seem like a waste. Church services are often forgettable. That's life. We drive to the same places, go through the same routines with the kids, buy the same groceries at the store, and share a bed with the same person every night. Church is often the same too—same doctrines, same basic order of worship, same preacher, same people. But in all the smallness and sameness, God works—like the smallest seed in the garden growing to unbelievable heights, like beloved

Tychicus, that faithful minister, delivering the mail and apostolic greetings ([Eph. 6:21](#)). Life is usually pretty ordinary, just like following Jesus most days. Daily discipleship is not a new revolution each morning or an agent of global transformation every evening; it's a long obedience in the same direction.

The church is not an incidental part of God's plan. Jesus didn't invite people to join an anti-religion, anti-doctrine, anti-institutional bandwagon of love, harmony, and re-integration. He showed people how to live, to be sure. But He also called them to repent, called them to faith, called them out of the world, and called them into the church. The Lord "didn't add them to the church without saving them, and he didn't save them without adding them to the church" (John Stott).

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" ([1 Cor. 13:7](#)). If we truly love the church, we will bear with her in her failings, endure her struggles, believe her to be the beloved bride of Christ, and hope for her final glorification. The church is the hope of the world—not because she gets it all right, but because she is a body with Christ for her Head.

Don't give up on the church. The New Testament knows nothing of churchless Christianity. The invisible church is for invisible Christians. The visible church is for you and me. Put away the Che Guevara t-shirts, stop the revolution, and join the rest of the plodders. Fifty years from now you'll be glad you did.

May 19, 2022

The share of Americans who say they would prefer to live farther apart from both their neighbors and local stores, coffee shops, and parks—places where they get together with others—has grown in recent years.

XIII. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. observed, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Said differently, what one person does can affect everyone, for good or for harm.

XIV. Relationships Don't Just Happen. They Take Training.

Belonging isn't like breathing. There is nothing automatic about it, especially given the changing conditions of modern life. The skills for relationships can't simply be caught today. Habits of belonging must be taught.

In many ways, Christians are advantaged in terms of relational formation. Given the corporate images of Christian identity in the Bible—the vine, the household, the family, the temple, the body—we know belonging isn't an optional part of human life. We must be vitally connected to other people and mutually dependent. The Christian life is a together life. God is a God who sets the solitary in families; he husbands the widow and fathers the orphan. Who need be alone in the kingdom of God?

Christians (and Jews) also have an entire genre of the Bible dedicated to teaching us about the practical affairs of everyday life, including human relationships. Our books of wisdom literature, especially the Book of Proverbs, instruct us in the virtues necessary for living well with others: discretion, self-control, humility, generosity, honesty, slowness to anger. Wisdom literature assumes that the mode of human life is inherently social—and that skills are required for navigating the complexities of human relationships.

Aside from pandemic conditions, much of our built environment doesn't naturally support relational connection. I'm not simply thinking of suburban neighborhoods, minivans disappearing behind garage doors. Trends in college housing, as a more pertinent example, show an increasing demand for student privacy. "Students want to choose how and when they socialize," [writes](#) Peter Aranyi of the global design firm Clark Nexsen. Mimicking their experience of the socially mediated world, students count on opting in and out of relational connection at will.

Social media is easily blamed for our relational ineptitude, but it's also true that social media peddles a lot of relationship advice. "I remember when I used to be a people-pleaser," one popular therapist and *New York Times* best-selling author [admits on Instagram](#). She posts a list of concessions she used to make in her relationships, such as "Not speak up for myself" or "Pretend to agree with people."

We often lament the conditions of a technological society, that we're losing the capacity for face-to-face communication in a digital environment. But there may be something more subtly dangerous about our digital world, in that we've come to expect easy, effortless goods. Relationships are not easy or effortless. They involve burdens. Having friends, being a good neighbor, choosing to marry, raising children: To sign up for any of these relational commitments ensures we can no longer protect our lives from interruption and contingency.

To belong isn't simply to benefit from human connection. It's to take responsibility for it. It's even to *suffer* for it.