

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
October 2, 2011

Being The Church  
Matthew 16:13-20

Today, we not only get to worship with our brothers and sisters from the Korean Glory PC, but for Wallingford PC we get to start a new sermon series called “Being the Church.” We’re going to have a chance to look at what it means to be a part of Christ’s church. This series is going to be four weeks long – every Sunday in October except for Oct. 16. This will be an opportunity for those of you who are not members of WPC to find out more about our church and, at the end of the series, to decide whether you’d like to join. And for those of you who are already members, it will be a chance to refresh your knowledge of what it means to be a member of Christ’s church and why it’s important. This series is just as much for you as for nonmembers.

Let’s start at the foundation of the church. The church is built on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The living Christ is the foundation – without him, it doesn’t matter what kind of building you have, or how many people attend services, it’s not the church. The church is not

an exclusive club for insiders or members only. It's for those who want to follow Jesus.

I want to make clear that the church doesn't exist for itself; it exists for the hope of the world. God's not at all interested in institutional survival. But God has decided to work through the church for mission in the world.

In today's passage, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They respond that people think he's a great leader and prophet. Jesus then asks, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God."

Jesus says, "Bingo! You got it, Peter." To be a part of the church begins with being a part of Jesus Christ: it begins with faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he suffered and died on the cross in our place, and that he rose again from the dead. We're saved by grace through faith. Faith in Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith, and it's what makes one a Christian, a member of the church universal (we're celebrating that fact today by worshiping with Korean Glory PC and participating in World Communion Sunday).

But given that our faith in Christ is key to our faith, and given the fact that the church is not simply a building but a relationship with the living Christ, why do we need to participate regularly in the life of the local church

if we're already part of the church universal? Is membership and participation in a church optional, or is it a necessity? Many people today would argue that joining the life of the church is optional, that we don't need the church because God can be experienced outside the church.

In the book *Habits of the Heart*, the chapter on religion talks about a person who actually named a religion after herself: Sheila Larson is a nurse who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."<sup>1</sup>

There are many people who share the same view as Sheila. They may not name their faith after themselves, but they describe it by saying "I'm spiritual but not religious." They find God not in church but in nature, in sunsets and in walks on the beach or hikes up a mountain. Many of these people are sure that people in the church have never been exposed to ideas so different and daring. But actually, none of this is new or different. It's simply another way for people to put together a more convenient religion of their own making. It's no different from Sheilaism.

It's interesting that many people think Christians will be surprised when told that they find God in nature, in the trees and the beach and the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, p. 220-221.

sunset. Frankly, I don't find that view surprising. What I'd like to say to these people is this: yes, you're right. Actually, we in the church agree with you. God can be found in nature. If you read the psalms, you'll find that people have been finding God in nature for thousands of years. It's all over the Bible.

But then I'd want to push a little harder : So, you find God in the sunset? Great, so do I. But how about in the face of cancer? Cancer is nature, too. Do you worship that as well? And how do you talk about these kinds of topics with your children?

Because if these children actually went to Sunday School and church, they could ask their questions about cancer when somebody they love gets sick. They could talk about their grandparent's death. They would have a spiritual community where they can be supported and where they can ask questions. But without the church, there's a vacuum where children's questions get answered without any formation or guidance of the faith community, so that when they see God in the rainbow or other happy things it all works, but not in the face of sin or unexpected disasters in life. How is suffering dealt with? How do you wrestle with worldwide disaster? God wants us to witness pain and suffering and then he want us to do something about it.

The best way to do that is through community. That's why I believe, contrary to the popular wisdom of this age that people are spiritual but not religious, that we desperately need religion, and we desperately need its clearest expression, the church. The church matters.

Pastor Lillian Daniel tells a story of some elementary school kids who were fairly new to the church, and who had had one year of Sunday school under their belts. They were getting ready to participate in their 2<sup>nd</sup> Christmas pageant ever. After practice, one of the kids asked, "Do you mean to tell me that we're going to be doing exactly the same story we did last year?" But of course, that's the point. We need to hear the stories of our faith over and over again. Today that person is all grown up, and he's been blessed by the repetition of hearing about God's love year after year that helps give his chaotic days meaning.

Now I do want to acknowledge the fact that the church has done some embarrassing, cruel, and even sinful things down through the ages. People have killed in the name of God. The only problem with the church is that it's made up of people. Tony Campolo tells a story of a former student of his who said, "I have no time for church; the church is full of hypocrites!" Campolo responded, "You're right! That's why you'll feel very much at home if you come and join us. The church is full of hypocrites and, if you'll

come, you'll feel just like one of us. There's no doubt that we church people *are* hypocrites. In one way or another, everyone in this world is a hypocrite. It's just that church people, for the most part, are hypocrites who know they are hypocrites and they've come to church to find out how God can help them overcome their hypocrisy." Christians love the church and want to be with its people in spite of their shortcomings. Church loyalty is always a part of Christian living.<sup>2</sup>

The church is like a hospital full of sick people getting treatment for their conditions. The good news is that God chooses to use imperfect people like Peter to run his church.

One more reason to be in the church: There are in fact some things that we can't do for ourselves, raising the dead being the big one. The resurrection? Try doing that for yourself. In the church, we run together led by the Lord who overcame death and offers us new life. And we do it together because Jesus was willing to work with us even though we screw things up so often. We're still trying to be the body of Christ today, utterly human and realistic enough to know that we need a Savior who is indeed divine. And we're not called to journey alone. That's where church comes in.

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, p. 47.

My preaching professor Tom Long says: “Jesus’ ministry will not end with his death. Jesus’ mission will continue – in and through the church. The church will extend Jesus’ message and ministry beyond Israel to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:16-20). The church is not merely a religious institution or a society for the preservation of good ideas about God. Rather, the church is a colony of the kingdom of heaven, Christ’s own saving presence in human society. In the terms of Matthew’s Gospel, the church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, Matthew, p. 202-3.