

The Church Withstanding the Gates of Hell

Matthew 16:13-20 and Romans 12:1-8

One day Jesus asked his disciples, "What's the word about me on the street?" The disciples spill the beans: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Not bad company for a country preacher. John called Israel to repentance. Elijah stomped on the prophets of Baal. Jeremiah – major OT prophet.

Listen, everyone has an opinion about Jesus. In the gospels, the scribes called him a blasphemer. People said he was out of his mind, called him Beelzebub, a drunkard, a glutton, a friend of sinners, and said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary* and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Pharisees and Sadducees had unflattering opinions about Jesus, but they were more honest than the way the name of Jesus has been hijacked, hogtied, and forced to serve the demonic politics of every age.

There's a problem with opinions that we need to confront. There is a distinction between opinion and knowledge. "This distinction is important. Without recognizing the difference between opinion and knowledge, one runs the risk of ascribing the status of knowledge to ideas that are conjectural and/or erroneous" (Richard A. Cherwitz and James W. Hikins, *Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology*). In our culture we have ascribing the status of knowledge to mere opinion, but as the writer of Proverbs points out with uncommon common sense, a pig with a gold ring in his snout is still a pig.

Flannery O'Connor's description of the South as "Christ-haunted" can be applied to the entire nation, especially now that Southern religion is insinuating itself into national politics. "Like Hazel Motes in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* we are pursued relentlessly by the wild, ragged figure of Christ moving from tree to tree in the back of our minds, motioning us to turn around and come into the dark." The people that this should make the most nervous are the liberals who believe that all this Christ talk is now beneath them. But the amazing grace of God avails even for zealot fundamentalists and unregenerate liberals and having been both, I bear faithful witness.

When it comes to opinions about Jesus our cup "runneth" over. The search for the historical Jesus can be so maddening as to tempt one into a Tea

Party theological snit and stomp around the country shouting, "I want my Jesus back." Almost everyone has an opinion about Jesus.

So what does Jesus ask his disciples? He asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus directs his question to the disciples because they are the ones he has called. Finally, Peter, the disciple you would never ask to lead a time of silent prayer, blurts out: "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." For the first time, a disciple publicly recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah. And the answer of Simon Peter is a powerful speech act – truth based on revelation. The church is built on this speech act of Simon Peter. We can never abandon this confession of faith, because it is not a verbal artifact, a confession "back there," done forever. Not a motto carved in stone. **It is a required, repeatable speech act.** Otherwise the gift of Peter's faith will be lost to us. This is our main task: Public, verbal, spoken witness. It is not easy to say in our world.

So what happens? Jesus says to Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. "Blessed are you Peter." I know people who have been waiting all their lives for their father to say, "Blessed are you daughter." Imagine the blessing of Jesus is on our lives. What more does self esteem require than the blessing of the incarnate son of God – the second person of the Trinity?

Jesus says that Peter's confession was revealed to him by **"my father in heaven."** There's something more to Jesus that we can't learn even from the Bible and this must be revealed to us by the Father in heaven. Jesus is the revelation of God. What is God like? The answer: Jesus. Simon Peter and Matthew are witnesses to the revelation of Jesus. They are irreplaceable witnesses because without them, and without Scripture, we would not know Jesus. So far in his career as a disciple, Peter hasn't exactly distinguished himself. Yet the Father in heaven revealed to Simon Peter the identity of his Son. Thank God revelation is not based on perfection.

"Upon this rock" has, of course, created a lot of rock-throwing among the churches. **Whether Peter is the rock or the faith of Peter is the rock matters to a lot of people.** It has a central role in Catholic and Protestant understandings of church, in the meaning of authority in the church, and in the role of the Pope in the church. Questions about the role of Peter along with questions about the status of the church as "the body of Christ" are inseparable from questions of church government and authority. There are

OT references to sacrifices being offered on the rock and thus suggest that Peter's role is not about status but about service and sacrifice.

Still Protestants and Catholics have a lot of bad history between us and it's more than hurt feelings. Protestants can be guilty of certain naïve ideas about Catholics. You might think that all a Catholic needs to do is know when to show up for Mass. The Jesuits, of course, thought that was not enough. They thought smart Catholics ought to know something about philosophy. So Catholic laity were taught Plato to make them Catholic. What a world!

God has not given up on the church and we can't tell our story without the Catholics and neither can the Catholics tell their story without us. Somehow Protestants and Catholics and Non-denominationalists must learn how to go forward so that once again the church might discover what it means that we are part of the church built on the rock, and stop trying to push one another off the rock in some religious version of "King of the Hill".

However we read the passage, without the Catholic Church there would be no Baptists. If you had grown up, like me, among Landmark Baptists and read the strange history of *The Trail of Blood*, by the Arkansas preacher, J. M. Carroll, you would have nothing to do with the idea that we are indebted to the Catholic Church. The sub-title of the book: *Following the Christians down through the Centuries or the History of the Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day*. Well, I grew up twenty miles from the Louisiana-Arkansas line where Landmark Baptists and Primitive Baptists were thicker than fleas. It took a long time for me to grasp that there were a lot of third cousins twice removed in Carroll's history of the Baptists. Maybe you are not even aware of how such anti-Catholic polemic has residual influence even in the pews of a church like ours.

Peter got the confession right: Jesus is God's Messiah, the Son of God. "Peter is the name necessary to remind Christians that there has been and is a witness, across time and space, who has never failed to direct the church and the world to the reality that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ," (Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*) and the Catholic Church, has always been a historic and necessary part of that witness. Separating Peter from his faith is an unnecessary operation.

Look Jesus says he is going to build a church and the gates of hell will not destroy it. Now, some folks will tell you that Jesus never meant to create the church. I dissent. Jesus got exactly what he meant to have: a people

gathered around him who have the ability to live according to the new age he established, an imperfect people always moving toward being made perfect in love, failing, confessing, trying again, confessing, forgiving.

Church is a mixed bag. Peter said, "You are the Christ." But then Peter said, "I don't know him." The disciples all vowed to follow Jesus to death and then they all promptly deserted him. Don't get discouraged at our mixed reviews. There has never been an ecclesial golden age no matter how much we idealize the past. The temptation to believe our forebears were more faithful than us can lead to despair and to a sense that we can't match them so why try.

And then, Jesus, of all things, says, "The gates of Hell shall not prevail against my church." Can you believe it? I've seen the church blown over like a house of straw. I have seen the church, like Little Red Riding Hood, duped by the wolf. I've watched churches disintegrate over the color of shingles to put on the roof, the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, whether or not to fire the music director, the pastor, or both. So, maybe it is OK for me to ask Jesus, "Are you sure you want us to believe that the church can withstand the gates of hell?" Well, Jesus smiles and says, "Yes," and he also promises to be with us always and to never abandon his church.

Then, of all things, Jesus says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." This is not some power grab by the church. Having the keys means God has given us a bundle of opportunities. These are the words of the holy one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens:⁸ Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but **little power**, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Binding and loosing is ultimately about faithful witness. But we are captured by the culture in which we live. Perhaps this is something like Wittgenstein's "picture that held us captive" – a frame that we "have trouble often thinking ourselves outside of." A picture full of silent witnesses. A crowd of Christians with no mouths. This is the frame in which we are frozen.

We need to imagine ourselves outside the frame. Rhetorical scholars refer to imagined interaction as a good way to have difficult conversations. In advance of speaking to someone, you carry on an imagined dialogue with the other person. This imagined speech act is one way that we can learn to bear articulate, verbal witness to the faith.

We can also learn to do a hard thing by doing easier, related actions first. So if the hard act is to publicly confess Jesus, let me ask, were you a Boy Scout or Girl Scout? "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country." "On my honor, I will try: to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law." ⁴ "Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?" "I do." "Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" "I do." Now the hard part: I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of the living God. Do you remember when you came forward to confess your faith in Jesus Christ? Did you come forward on the Sunday you told your mama you were coming forward? It was hard wasn't it?

I don't know everything that it means to say that Jesus is the Savior of the world, the one God sent. But I do believe that this is the primary way that the church stands against the gates of hell. I believe Jesus is the one we have been looking for. I believe Jesus has come for us and for our salvation as the ultimate expression of the love of God. I believe this is the critical starting point in our journey toward fullness, and the required, repeatable speech act that God expects from us. Amen.