

Whose Church Is It?

Matthew 16:13-20

Speculation had been building for months. If Twitter had been around in the first century, Jesus would have been “trending” big time. He had fed five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish. He had fed four thousand with seven loaves and a few small fish. His disciples had seen Him walk on water and calm the storm. So we have to shake our heads when, at the beginning of this chapter, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus and ask Him to show them a sign from heaven. It should not surprise us that Jesus declined their request. He knew that their motives were not right and that, whatever He might do, they would never be satisfied.

Apparently it got Jesus thinking. How much did those closest to Him understand about who He was? Here, in a rare moment in which Jesus was alone with His disciples, He asked a big question. The conversation that followed was a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. After this, Jesus began moving toward Jerusalem and the cross.

In these verses, Jesus asks one critical question. But there are at least two other questions that Jesus’ words imply for those who identify as His followers. Here, then, are the three questions:

Who is Jesus?

To whom does the church belong? Or “Whose church is it?” and

What is our mission?

I. First, who is Jesus? Matthew 16 feels a lot like a retreat – the kind we might take to reflect and recharge our batteries. Jesus had taken the disciples north of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. This was outside of Jewish territory. The clamor and the demands could be set aside for a while. In this setting, Jesus asks, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

“Son of Man” was a term that Jesus used to refer to Himself. Jesus is asking the disciples what they were hearing people say about his identity. The disciples came back with a number of answers. “Some say you are John the

Baptist.” [A couple of chapters earlier Matthew had recorded John the Baptist’s death. So, apparently, some were saying that Jesus was the reincarnation of John.] Someone else piped up and said “Elijah.” There was a common belief among Jews at that time that, before the Messiah appeared, the prophet Elijah would return to prepare the way for him. A few of the others named Jeremiah and some of the other prophets. Up to this point, it is a pretty casual conversation. But then, suddenly, things get personal.

“What about you?” Jesus asks. “Who do you say I am?”

It’s one thing to talk about other people’s ideas. It’s another to talk about what we ourselves believe. Our answer to this particular question reveals a lot about where we are in our journey of faith. Is Jesus one more in a long line of good people who spoke on God’s behalf? Or is He something more? Is there something unique about Him that sets Him apart from all who came before Him and everyone since? “Who is Jesus?”

I don’t know for sure, but I imagine that there was a long moment of silence as the disciples considered their response. Finally, Simon the fisherman spoke up – “You are the Messiah,” he said, “the Son of the living God.”

This wasn’t the first time that some of those words had been used to describe Jesus. After walking on the water, when Jesus climbed into the disciples’ boat and the wind immediately died down, the disciples had been awestruck. “Truly you are the Son of God,” they had said (Matt. 14:33).

But that had been a different situation. That affirmation had come out of a crisis. This was a moment of reflection. Simon was the first to bring some important truths together. As we’ll see next week in the verses that follow this passage, even now Simon did not fully grasp the implications of his own words. But it’s also true that Simon would never have come to a clear understanding of Jesus without the insight that he articulated that day. There are two aspects of his insight that are particularly significant.

First, Simon grasped that Jesus was the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes. That is the implication of his statement that Jesus was the “Messiah.”

Anticipation of a coming Messiah was thick in the air among Jewish people in the first century. The Jewish scholars saw the promise of the Messiah over and over in the Old Testament. Every few years, it seemed that some charismatic figure claimed to be the Messiah. But Jesus had not made such a claim. There were lots of reasons for that. People were reading all kinds of things into the image of the Messiah – many of them reflecting their own biases. Jesus knew how easy it would be for people to try to force Him into a mold that was out of step with the calling that God had placed on His life.

Because Jesus had steered clear of claiming the mantle of the Messiah, until now people had identified Him as something else. As the other disciples noted, he was being called John the Baptist or one of the prophets. But on this day, Simon saw that Jesus was more than that. He truly was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes – even if the Jewish people failed to understand what they really needed and what God was going to accomplish through His Messiah.

The other insight Simon brought that day was that Jesus was the Son of God. From our New Testament perspective, this seems to be an automatic connection. Of course the Messiah is the Son of God! After all, He is a member of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this was not automatic in the first century. Most of the Jewish people expected a Messiah that was fully human. Anointed? Yes – but anointed in a way that was similar to the way in which King David had been anointed. It was not their expectation that, in the Messiah, God Himself would be present with them.

Simon the fisherman got that that day. And that affirmation changed him – so much so that Jesus gave Him a new name. “You are Peter,” He said, “and on this rock I will build my church.” You may know that there is a play on words here. “Peter” means “rock.” For two thousand years, different parts of the church have been debating what Jesus intended by those words. We'll get to that in a few minutes. But the thing that strikes me is that, whatever else Jesus may be saying, He is affirming that Peter's understanding of who Jesus was would have a profound impact on Peter's life from that time on. If Jesus was the

Messiah – if He was the Son of God – then Peter couldn't just go on being Simon the fisherman. In other words, he couldn't simply go on living as he had before. He was a different person.

And our answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” will determine how we live our lives. You see, if Jesus is just another charismatic religious leader who gained a following – if He is just another good person who said some insightful things – we can pick and choose which of Jesus' teachings we want to embrace. And, for the most part, we will choose those things that match up with what we already think and that allow us to live as we have always lived. But if Jesus is God's Messiah – God's uniquely chosen Messenger – and if He is nothing less than the Son of God – if He is God Himself – we can no longer pick and choose. His words have absolute authority over our lives. And we can be sure that there are aspects of Jesus' teaching that will challenge the ways in which we have been conditioned to think and some of the ways of living that have become comfortable for us.

But there's still more to it. It goes beyond Jesus' teaching. If Jesus is God's Messiah and if He is the Son of God, then He has power to do for us what no one else can do. He is in a unique position to bring transformation to our lives through what He ultimately did in going to the cross. If He is the Son of God, He is not just a figure in the distant past. He is active and present in our lives today!

So, the question is still valid. What about you? Who do you say Jesus is?

II. That isn't the only question suggested by Jesus' words to Peter, however. Peter's insight that day had implications that went beyond Peter himself. They would also impact the community that would be centered on the life of Jesus. Jesus refers here to “the church.” Some have argued that, because the church didn't even exist yet, this reference must be an addition that Matthew placed in the text. But the word there doesn't refer to the organization that we now mean by the church. The word simply means “those who are called out.”

Jesus knew from the beginning that, if His ministry was to extend beyond His own lifetime, He had to build a community that would carry on His work. The church was Jesus' idea. That raises the second question. "Whose church is it?" To whom does the church belong? Jesus implies the answer when He says, "I will build *my* church."

That suggests some very important things for us – especially in the transition that LifeStream is facing. It's important to realize that the church does not belong to us. The church does not belong to the pastor. The church doesn't belong to the church board. And the church doesn't belong to the congregation. The church belongs to Jesus. That means that the church does not exist for our benefit. In recent years, it has often been stated that "the church is the only organization that exists for people who are not members." Now, I know. We can take that too far. Certainly the New Testament makes it clear that one of the marks of a Spirit-filled church is a concern for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Acts 2 describes the practice of the early church where "all the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need" (Acts 2:44-45). I can't imagine a church that would simply ignore the real needs of the people with whom we worship.

But there is a danger that the church begins to think and act as if its primary purpose is to cater to the desires of its members. When that happens, we lose the vision and the passion that Jesus had for the world that is all around us – a world that is broken in many cases and without any direction. That's when we need to be reminded that the church doesn't belong to us. It belongs to Jesus and it must care for the people and the circumstances that Jesus cared about.

That raises the bristles on the backs of a lot of church folks. But there is a flip-side to that realization that is very assuring. The church does not belong to us. It belongs to Jesus. And that means that Jesus Himself will build the church. "I will build my church," Jesus says. Once again, we can take that too

far. We can conclude that, since Jesus will build His church, we're off the hook. We don't need to do anything but sit back in our seats and enjoy the ride. Certainly, that's not how the disciples interpreted Jesus' words.

It is true, however, that we can rest in the fact that, while Jesus has called us to be part of His work in the world, the ultimate success and survival of the church does not depend on our ability. The church will not rise or fall depending on our competence. Jesus will build His church.

There is no better example of this than the person to whom Jesus was speaking that day. Peter would play an instrumental part in the birth and early growth of the church. On the day of Pentecost, which is often referred to as the birthday of the church, it was Peter who preached the first sermon. The other disciples looked to Peter as their leader in many cases. But any reading of the New Testament will show that the early growth of the church was sometimes *in spite of* Peter rather than because of Peter. He had some really good days – like the day of Pentecost and his interaction with Cornelius and his household.

There were other times, however, when Peter caved under pressure and when he showed a lack of good judgment. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul records how Peter acted in the city of Antioch. Peter's first inclination on arriving in Antioch was to eat meals with the Gentile Christians there. But when some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem showed up, Peter's attitude changed. The Jewish Christians believed that Peter was still bound by Jewish law which taught that eating with Gentiles made you unclean. Peter was intimidated. So he quit breaking bread with his Gentile brothers and sisters. And because of his influence, the other Jewish Christians did the same thing. Can you imagine what it did to the church when half of the people wouldn't eat with the other half because they considered them physically and spiritually unsanitary? Given the things for which Peter himself had been forgiven, it was total hypocrisy. And Paul called him on it and apparently they worked things out.

The point is that, if it had depended on Peter and other human leaders, the church wouldn't have made it out of the first century. But while those things

were important and couldn't be ignored, the One on whom the growth and impact of the church depended was Jesus Himself.

Jesus is still the One who is building His church. If you'll bear with me, I think there is something I need to say at this point even though it feels a little awkward for me to talk about. One of the things I'm hearing from a number of people these days goes something like this, "Pastor Steve, I don't know what's going to happen to LifeStream when you're not the pastor any more." And while I'm grateful for the last 22 years and for what God has helped us accomplish together, the fact is that the One who has promised to build the church is not stepping down on September 28! Jesus will still be building His church and "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

This is one of the places where the old King James Version is a little misleading. In that version, verse 18 reads, "the gates of hell will not prevail against it." That image – the gates of hell – raises the image of satanic power. And it is true that Satan will never overcome the community of Christ followers. But in *this* case, the NIV conveys the literal translation. It is the "gates of Hades" that will not prevail against the church. Hades was the place of the dead. It wasn't a place of punishment or torment. It was more of a shadowy realm in which the spirits of the dead rested.

Jesus isn't making a theological statement about the afterlife here. He is using a figure of speech with which His disciples would have been familiar. The "gates of Hades" represent "the powers of death." He is saying that, while individual leaders of the church will pass away and while even the most vibrant Christian movements will not last forever, the powers of death will not prevail against the church because He, the eternal Son of God, is the One who will build His church. He is the "constant." He is the Alpha and the Omega – the Beginning and the End.

III. So, what is our mission? I'm not talking about our "mission statement" – though that is important and I plan to talk about that before the end of September too. Mission statements are meant to express the purpose of a

specific organization in a specific context. I'm talking about something broader here. These things apply to the church in every time and in any place.

First, based on Jesus' words here in Matthew 16, our mission is to proclaim who Jesus is. He is not merely one great teacher and leader among others. He is the Messiah – the One God anointed to save us – and He is the unique Son of God. He is the One who is worthy of our faith. It is that affirmation that opens the hearts of people to the transforming power and grace of the Christian message.

Based on that proclamation, it is our mission then to open the door for others to enter the Kingdom. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says in verse 19. Some have interpreted those words to mean that Jesus gave Peter – or Jesus gave the church, depending on their theology – the power to decide who gets in to the kingdom and who is left out. Sadly, sometimes the church has acted as if that is our role.

Clearly that is *not* what Jesus had in mind. In fact, that was one of the things that drove Jesus crazy about the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. In Matthew 23:13 Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." So, whatever else Jesus means when He says that He is giving the keys of the kingdom to Peter and the other disciples; He intends that they would use those keys to *unlock* doors for people so that they could enter.

There are so many barriers in peoples' lives that are keeping them from the life that God intends for them. Some have a distorted understanding of who God is. Some have never heard the message of the Gospel. Some are bound by shame – others by addiction. The list goes on and on. Jesus tells us that it is our mission – it our privilege – to proclaim that Jesus has brought down all of those barriers by His death and resurrection. We, the church, have been given the keys to unlock those doors!

Three Questions:

I. Who Is _____?

A. Peter's insight:

1. Jesus was the _____ of Israel's hopes
2. Jesus was the _____ of God

B. This affirmation _____ Peter

-- Our answer determines how we _____ our lives

II. Whose _____ Is It?

A. The church does not belong to _____

-- It does not exist for our _____

B. Jesus Himself will _____ the church

-- It does not depend on our _____

C. The "powers of _____" cannot overcome the church

III. What Is Our _____?

A. To _____ who Jesus is

B. To _____ the door for others to enter the Kingdom