

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we find Jesus and the disciples in the district of Caesarea Philippi asking them, who do people say that the Son of Man is? Caesarea Philippi is a place populated mainly by Gentiles, meaning those who are on the outside of the Jewish faith...the outcasts. They are viewed as unworthy souls.

Caesarea Philippi is the sort of place I know well and have spent a good bit of my life in. It is the sort of place that today, the average “good” Christian would not be caught dead or alive in. Furthermore, the folks of Caesarea Philippi would be rejected by these “good” Christian folks if they were to be found in each other’s company. The outsiders would be rejected because in Caesarea Philippi, they worship the god known as Pan. Pan was the god of the wild, the god of rustic improvised music, and Pan is the god affiliated with sex...in other words this is the god of sex, drugs and rock and roll.

As I said, I spent a good bit of my life in this place. And while I was there, I recall conversations with folks in the clubs and bars that I was working in as a musician. They would find out that I was going to school to become a pastor and they would say things like, “You can do that?! But you play rock and roll in this bar, how can you become a preacher?” The other thing I heard quite a bit, and it was the one that got to me the most, emotionally, they would say, “I am not worthy to go to church.” Or, “They don’t want me in there.” I had a friend whose family owned the bar our band was playing in on a regular basis and she told me that she was not allowed in a church with her children because her family owned a bar. I guess the Jesus they were protecting only associated with noble and righteous people and only healed those who were well off, or very healthy.

I have also presided at a graveside memorial service on the first anniversary of a young man’s death. I did so because when his mother found out I was studying to be a pastor, she asked me if I could do a memorial for her son on the first anniversary of his death. She wanted to do this because there was no church or clergy that would serve this mother in the time of her son’s death because her son was a biker.

As I was experiencing this from these folks, these so-called Gentiles...I was never belittled, criticized, or looked down upon by anyone who learned about what I was doing at that time. I was even encouraged by a good number of the folks who approached me and asked me about it. Yes, I have been to a place just like Caesarea Philippi. But it was there that Jesus came calling in my life. And it was because of my experience of Caesarea Philippi that I learned of the powerful grace of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ and the cost of that grace. It was there that I experienced a misunderstanding of who Jesus really is and how the love and grace of Jesus Christ has no boundaries, nor is he confined to our understanding or misunderstandings. Oh, I sort of knew who Jesus was during that time.

Thankfully I came to learn much more about the Son of God and the grace and the love that is Jesus Christ through the proclamation of people who have been wounded and hurt by the self-righteousness of those claiming to be “good-Christians”. As I learned more, I could see how our protective feelings about who Jesus is, is wrongly manifested at times due to our self-righteousness

or our fear of people we know nothing about other than what we see and assume about them. What I came to understand is that the self-righteousness of the church and misunderstandings and assumptions of who the Son of Man is does not build, but merely tears down the church.

Today, in the Gospel, we hear Jesus skillfully seeking the disciple's understanding of who he truly is. It's as if Jesus wants to see if their faith is based on public opinion or based on what they have already experienced in the very presence of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus does this by questioning the disciples about who people think he is. From what we hear them tell Jesus, they seem to know something but there is no consensus. They suggest that Jesus may be a prophet such as...John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. But Jesus, more or less says, OK I've heard what public opinion says, now, tell me...who do you say I am? Peter then boldly answers:

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

After this very bold and very profound confession from Peter we hear Jesus say:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. (Matt 16:18)

Before we move on, I want to clear up a few things about the names that are before us in this Gospel lesson today. This is not a different Simon here in this passage, Simon is the son of John. Jonah is the Hebrew equivalent of John just like Joshua is the Hebrew equivalent of Jesus. This is the one and only Simon that is named Peter by Jesus.

I think we all know that the name Peter also means rock in Greek. This name and mention of a rock, opens the door to the ambiguity of this claim by Jesus to build the church. Is it Peter or is it a rock that Jesus will build the church on? We are not able to distinguish if it is Peter or the rock that is the foundation or are they one in the same? For those who say, well Jesus spoke in Aramaic, yes, he did but the same thing happens in Aramaic that happens here in the Greek, the name and the rock are one in the same. Nonetheless, it raises the question, what specifically will Jesus build this church on? Is it Peter's "rock-solid" character or his rock-solid-strong-devout faith that builds the church?

This is questionable because in the next few verses of this very chapter we hear Peter getting sharply scolded by Jesus because he seems to contradict what he says here to Jesus, that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Peter clearly misunderstands what this means because when Jesus explains that he will undergo great suffering and be killed by the elders and the chief priests, Peter inadvertently rejects this notion. He rejects it because of his love for Jesus; this is NOT what he wants for Jesus. But it is what MUST happen to reveal a far greater love.

So, what is it that Jesus builds the church on? The word church is used five times in the Gospels and it is only in the Gospel of Matthew that this word is used. Interestingly when you Google the word church, the *first* definition that is listed says, "a building for public religious services and especially Christian worship." I even referred to an old dictionary, an actual book, and it said the same thing. But this has nothing to do with what Jesus is saying here.

The term that gets translated as “church” is actually *ἐκκλησία* which means, an assembly, or a gathering. This Greek word *ἐκκλησία* can be associated with the word we know as eclectic which means, deriving ideas, style, or taste from a broad and diverse range of sources. Likewise, *ἐκκλησία* can be a gathering or an assembly with a broad and diverse range of people. An *ἐκκλησία* is not a building, it is a gathering or an assembly that is the foundation that the church is built on. What Jesus builds on is what Peter is confessing, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is what builds the church.

Peter along the other disciples have been in his presence, they have seen first-hand what Jesus has done, they have seen the love he has poured out upon them and upon others in need. And in their experience of Jesus, they have worshipped him by saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” And they build the church when they share this testimony. But Jesus doesn’t want them to say this...they are given the power by Jesus to become grace and love for others and this is what attracts a gathering, this is what people assemble around, and this is what builds the church.

Today in our worship we go from here in peace to love and serve the Lord by becoming that grace that we have all experienced in this proclaimed Word and in this Holy Meal. This is what builds the church! The church is not a building that isolates, the church is the gathering, the assembly that shares not in words, but in deed and in truth, the grace and forgiveness we know as Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer puts it this way:

The church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ but (the church) is Christ himself who has taken form among people.¹

What Jesus is building on is that confession, or Peter’s willingness to share his testimony of what he has seen in Jesus...but NOT just with words, with deeds and truth. We seem to attempt to avoid sin by boasting about our faith and our self-righteousness by isolating ourselves from the others and avoiding others instead of actively becoming faith, becoming grace, and becoming God’s love in the world. What does Jesus build on? He builds on Peter actively doing God’s will by proclaiming who God is in the world. And what is built is not a space that exists for itself, it is an existence that reaches far beyond itself.

When we think about building the church we imagine temples, a building, or even a house and we think about drawing or bringing people into this space to be, in essence, protected from the violence and hatred of the world. And yes, that is one concept of church, but Jesus is building onto something far greater. Bonhoeffer explains it this way:

The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely, the world that is loved and reconciled by God. It is not true that the church intends to or must spread its space out over the space of the world. It desires no more space than it needs to serve the world with its witness to Jesus Christ and to the world’s reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world.²

¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, Ethics*. Edited by Clifford J. Green, General Editor Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr., Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2009. *Ethics as Formation*, page 96

² *Ibid.* page 63

To say to people out there, you do not belong in here, is not the church, it is NOT the grace of Jesus Christ, and it is certainly not building the church. Our task is not to point out the sins of others and then condemn them, Jesus didn't even do this. We are called to proclaim a Messiah, a Son of God who is forgiveness and salvation, but our proclamation is not just our words, our proclamation is how we make Jesus known through our acts of mercy and forgiveness. This is what the church is built on and that building started with the very forgiveness we ourselves as individuals have received through the waters of our Baptism.

Bonhoeffer goes on to articulate this notion this way:

So the first task given to those who belong to the church of God is not to be something for themselves, for example, by creating a religious organization or leading a pious life, but to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world. For this the Holy Spirit equips those to whom the Spirit comes.³

Christ exists in the assembly, exists in a community that extends beyond the walls of this building. Does the Jesus Christ we call the Son of God, the Jesus Christ we call our Messiah merely exist in here? Jesus Christ comes to life in places like Caesarea Philippi...comes to life when there is grace rather than judgment and exclusion, where there is listening rather than talking or shouting. There is no doubt that faith today in our culture is a challenge to live out. But keep in mind that "Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin and more about courageously and actively doing God's will."⁴

This is a challenge...*but* to truly believe what Jesus believes about us and gives to us because of that belief...we can only continue to live out that faith through the grace and mercy we share and make known in these challenging times. Through our faith, may we know and take comfort in...the fact that we are the Messiah's plan for what the Messiah wants to do in the world and that is to save it and bring it all into God's glorious kingdom. Today, as we confess our belief in Jesus, it might serve us well to believe also that Jesus believes in us...so much so that he gave His life to save us all and continues to build His church for any in need.⁵

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

³ Ibid. page 64

⁴ This is NOT a quote from Bonhoeffer as the internet will lead you to believe, it is from Eric Metaxas' book entitled, *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, A Righteous Gentile VS. The Third Reich*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc. 2010, page 486.

⁵ The closing paragraph is formed from Willimon's theme for the appointed lessons for this 13 Sunday of Pentecost. Willimon, William, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 39, No.3, Year A, July, August, September 2011. "Believing, Acting, Believing," Commentary for 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 16, page 33-36