

THE INVINCIBLE POWER OF A VISION¹
Matthew 16: 13-25
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
July 3, 2011

Some of us are what I call vertical organizers. We stack things up. Over time we have little piles of stuff all around us, and summer tends to be the time when we do something about those stacks of papers.

I

Most of us also have a lot of non-tangible clutter stacked up around our lives. There are piles of old habits, leftovers from difficult relationships, mental printouts of old grudges we have refused to throw away, emotional files we have refused to discard, family squabbles we have allowed to build up around us. Sometimes in church we decide that it is time to start cleaning up those piles. We begin to throw away all the old stuff that clutters up our lives and keeps us from being the people we want to be. But we never seem to get it all done. We turn around and there are those piles again, and the messiness of life takes over.

So, I propose something novel today: just be still in the middle of our messy, overbooked lives, and listen—listen hard. Because there is Someone here in this place trying to get our attention, Someone who wants us to know

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that we are loved and treasured in the midst of our messiness. Just sit still in the middle of your life, and sense that beyond all the clutter there is a Love in which we live and move and have our being. That Love we call “God.”

The best expression of that Love we have found is in Jesus, and whether he intended to start a church or not will remain a matter of scholarly debate. But it is not a matter of debate with us, for the church simply is... It is all around us and within us. This beautiful place where we worship is an expression of the ministry of the church, but it is not the church itself. Rather, it is the meetinghouse of the church, the place where this local expression of the church gathers.

The church is both local and worldwide. It has an address like ours, but it is also everywhere, composed of every believer in every land. Our local expression of the church has adopted a vision statement that is clearly placed before us today: *We are a community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ.* Closely tied to that vision statement are four values that we hold dear: *inclusion, freedom of faith, spiritual growth, and service.* This vision and the four values statements are printed in most of our publications, and they are the flag under which we march. If we were to do a summer cleanup of all the clutter that accumulates

over the program year in church, that vision and those values would still be left.

II

Jesus once asked his disciples, *Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* The answer to that question would be a turning point for them all.

Before we even think of how they answered it, look at where he was when he asked it. The area around Caesarea Philippi was scattered with the temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Nearby was a deep cavern said to be the birthplace of Pan, the Greek God of nature and fertility. There was a tremendous temple of white marble built to worship Caesar as a god. So Jesus stood at the center of Syrian, Greek, and Roman worship; and there, of all places, he asked, *Who do people say that I am?* Peter's answer to that question came from deep within and almost takes your breath away. *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

In simplest terms, the church is composed of all kinds of people who have made that confession. We are diverse. We do not all interpret that confession the same way. But we have all in some way said the same thing: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Rembrandt could take a canvass, dab his paints on it, and create a beautiful painting. We call that art. Shakespeare could write a sonnet or a

play on ordinary paper. We call that genius. Bill Gates can sign a check for millions of dollars (and it will not bounce!). We call that capital. A skilled workman can take a piece of metal, shape it, twist it, mold it, and it becomes a thing of beauty and usefulness. We call that craftsmanship. Beethoven could create a musical score that he could only hear in his mind. We call that a symphony. But only God can take a diverse group of people who determine to follow the Way of Christ and transform them in the act of worship. We call that church!

III

That church is invincible. No, I am not saying that this particular congregation is invincible. This particular expression of church is as liable as any other to dry up and blow away if we are not careful.

But there is a church about which Jesus said that *the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*. The gates of Hades was a real place. It was the headwaters of the Jordan River, and it was famous. The water appears to come out of a huge cave in the side of a mountain. Ancient people believed it was the actual gate of Hades. Three hundred years before Christ, Alexander the Great found it and was so impressed that he built a temple to the god Pan. A century before Christ the Romans were so impressed with it that they built a temple to Caesar. That was where Jesus was standing with his disciples.

I can't help but wonder if he deliberately stood in that place surrounded by temples built to all the known religions of the time, and there he asked the question, *Who do people say that I am?* And you can imagine how they hemmed and hawed in the shadow of all those religions. But finally Peter, with the water from the actual "Gate of Hades" gurgling beneath their feet, said, *You are the Christ, the son of the living God.* Then we can only imagine how awed they were when Jesus said, *...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. All the trends of the day will not prevail against it. All the pressures of society will not prevail against it. All the national allegiances demanded of the people will not prevail against it. All the economic hardships they faced will not prevail against it!*

In this text Jesus calls Peter a *petros*, a little stone that gets caught in your shoe and drives you crazy. But the church is not built on a *petros*. Rather, the church is built on a *petra*—the gigantic stone from which the water gurgled up from the spring below. On this great foundation stone of faith in Christ the church is built.

Individually, we are all like a little *petros*. We must be irritants to God sometimes. But the church is built on a *petra*. As the familiar hymn so aptly says, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." The church is not built on our obvious weakness; it is built on faith in Christ, who is not weak.

The church is successful only in the power of Christ. He said, *On this rock I will build my church*. Look who is doing the building!

We do not do the building; Christ does. Not only is the church built on faith in Christ; it is built by Christ. When he called forth fishermen like Peter, James, John, and Andrew; when he called an internal revenue agent named Matthew; when he called an abused woman at the well whose home life was in shambles; when he called a little cheat named Zaccheus; when he called a Jewish fundamentalist named Paul; he was building his church! And he would say to them all, *You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit....²*

IV

In the providence of God we are living in the early years of the 21st century in the very shadow of the modern “Gates of Hades.” Temples abound in our culture. We all know and recognize them. They compete for our loyalty. But here you find yourself in this church on a Sunday morning in July. The same Christ who chose Peter and Andrew, Mary Magdalene and all the others, has also called you, and quietly guided you to this place to serve him.

Since God has placed you in this church, it means at least two things. First, it means that God has a place of service for you. You can love this

² John 15: 16.

imperfect church just as Christ does, and you can do your part to make it better. Second, it means that you and I must not reject those whom Christ has chosen. We are to love the great diversity of people who are called to be a part of this church.

Our vision is to be a community of believers who seek *to grow in our faith and understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ*. We do not need to add or subtract from that; we simply need to live it authentically. Then, we who are little stumbling stones will become God's house of living stones built on the sure foundation.