

12th Sunday After Pentecost

August 23, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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SERMON by Pastor Zach Johnson

In Isaiah it says: “...for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.” And again, Jesus says in our gospel reading this morning: “...and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

Have you ever wondered if there is any hope for the Church? I ask this because we seem to live in a day and age where many signs are pointing to the Church’s demise. There are many statistics and data out there that show the fact that all mainline Christian denominations have been in a steady decline for many years now. The fastest growing “religious” group in this country is the group known as the *nones*, those that consider themselves non-affiliated with any religious organization.



In addition, we are living in unprecedented times. So many churches cannot hold in-person worship right now because it isn't safe in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not everyone wants to participate with online, virtual worship. Some people cannot because they don't have a computer. Some people are just getting burnt out with all this virtual living we are having to do right now. Some people have found it easier to just sleep in on Sunday mornings. There is a real concern that the longer we have to maintain a virtual worshipping community, the greater chance more and more people will drift away from the faith community.

The COVID-19 crisis has also created much financial strain on many churches. With people having lost their jobs, our economy has suffered. This also means that many churches, including our own, have seen a decline in giving. It is clear that some churches may not survive financially and may have to close their doors.

With such a grim outlook, is there any hope for the church's survival?

This is why I find assurance in the words of Isaiah and the words of Jesus this morning. The words of Isaiah remind us that, while all things may eventually pass away, God's salvation and deliverance will never end and never go away. Jesus, of course, reminds us that not even the gates of Hades, that is, not even the powers of death will destroy the rock on which the church is built upon.

The truth is that the church has endured over these many centuries because of God's gift of salvation and promise. The early church, in the first few centuries continued to grow and endure in spite of all the Roman persecution happening. It eventually became the official religion of the Roman Empire after four centuries of persecution! The church survived the Great Schism when the eastern and western churches divided! Again, the church also survived the challenges of the reformation, when many protestant denominations were born into existence, including us Lutherans. The church has survived in the midst of wars, plagues, political corruption, and crumbling economies.

The church has survived because God still chooses to bring about salvation and reconciliation to our broken world through the church. God's mission of salvation is still alive and active as long as there are faith communities willing to go out and proclaim the good news through their words and actions. And there will always be faith communities because God continues to find ways to draw people into God's love, freeing them from the powers of sin and enriching them with spiritual gifts that can be used to proclaim the good news.



Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans that we read this morning. He tells the Roman church that, because they have been freed from the powers of sin and death through Christ Jesus' death and resurrection, they are free to live a sinless life, that is, a life that follows God's will. This is what Paul means when he talks about presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice; we are free to give of our whole selves to God.

When we do this, God gives us, not only the gifts of grace and mercy to remind us that sin no longer has any power over us, but God also gives us spiritual gifts that we can use in order to go out and proclaim the good news. Paul mentions a few of these gifts—prophecy, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and compassion. Each of us has at least one of these gifts that we can use to love and serve neighbor, as well as share the story of Jesus with others.

By sharing our spiritual gifts with others and showing others that they have been made free by God's love for them, God is using us to bring the gift of salvation and deliverance in the broken world. It is this action that gives the church purpose and meaning. It is because of this that the church will endure.

But one thing is also certain. Over the centuries, while the church has continued to endure, even in difficult times, the church has also had to adapt to the times. Yes, sometimes the church can be very slow at changing, but one of the reasons it has endured is because it has been willing to change. As Lutherans we proclaim a God who is ever reforming the church, which is why we celebrate the Reformation every year towards the end of October. If we truly believe that God is continually reforming the church, then we must expect change will happen.

We are seeing some of that change in our midst right now in the fact that we've had to adapt to social distancing in the midst of the current pandemic. Our worship takes place virtually and will do so for the foreseeable future. This a change we've had to make in order to still bring about the good news during these times.

I bring this up because, as the church continues to endure thanks to God's never-ending salvation, it will evolve. Twenty years from now the church may look different than it does now. How we do church may be completely different than how we do church currently. But the good news is that the church will continue to endure, for it will never truly die. After all, that is what Jesus promised Peter; that is what Jesus promise us. So, even though the signs look grim, we can trust that God will continue to purpose and repurpose the church so that the gift of salvation continues to redeem our world. Amen.



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