

I will build my church

Psalm 90:1-8, 12

Acts 2:36-42

Matthew 16:13-20

Text: Acts 2:41-42

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Introduction

When one of my grandsons was little he couldn't comprehend why some family pictures only included his mother and father and older sister. The idea that these pictures were taken before he was born just didn't compute. In our fall Bible study we have been exploring the big story of the Bible; the overarching narrative that God is enacting in the world; the true story, according to the scriptures, of human existence told at its proper depth. For many people today the Bible is an ancient book and wonder what it has to do with us. Our modern culture seems to be mired in the incomprehension somewhat like my grandson; how could there be anything important before we arrived on the scene?

In the course of this study we have arrived at the part of the story into which we fit...the section of the story that encompasses us now. The Biblical book of Acts tells the story of the explosive growth of early Christianity. The Apostles' letters are written in support of the growing church. This same story continues today as we share the good news of Jesus with our world.

Let us also remind ourselves that God stands in the same relationship to all times in his ever-present reality. The Biblical story that God tells of his purpose to have a people for himself is, therefore, always current. When we confess our faith with the Apostles' Creed we say we believe in 'The communion of saints.'" "The communion of saints" refers to the spiritual union of all believers, living and dead. So when we read of the first Christians—Peter, Paul, Barnabas, etc.—it is like the pictures of my grandson's family before he arrived on the scene; we are reading the story of our spiritual family before we, historically speaking, came into the picture. The wonder of God is that before the foundation of the world the completed picture is in God's vision.

1. Our reading from the book of Acts was a portion of the story considered to be the birthday of the church when “those who welcomed his (Peter’s) message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added” to their number. This took place on the Jewish festival of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus was raised from the dead. It was on this day that Peter addressed the crowds in Jerusalem giving this foundational Christian sermon. “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say,” proclaimed Peter, “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know, ... you crucified... but God raised him up... and of that we are witnesses.” Skilfully Peter weaves this message citing the Hebrew scriptures foreseeing this story of Jesus and drives to his conclusion: Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’

It was about a year and a half, perhaps two years, before this Pentecost sermon that Peter was in Galilee near the primary source of the Jordan river at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Jesus had taken his disciples there on a retreat and it was there that Jesus asked them, “who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” I draw to your attention the fact that the answer he gave that day is at the heart of his Pentecost sermon. “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

In the course of Jesus’ Galilean ministry with his disciples the human needs of people pressed upon them constantly. We know that Jesus healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, cast out demons that tormented people, and even raised the dead. When Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the good news to the villages of Galilee he also gave them authority to meet these pressing needs. And this took place in the shadow of the injustices of Roman occupation. What are the pressing needs of our day? If news feeds are an indication then climate, mental health, racism, equity, victimizations of various kinds, health, justices of various kinds, and an era of hyper-partisanship would seem to be the pressing needs.

I note with you that while Jesus was immersed in meeting people’s needs he perceives that people have a need more pressing than the ones that are most often on the surface. Notice the question Jesus presses upon his disciples, ‘who do you say that I am?’ We humans have lots of questions for God and are quite willing to inform God how things ought to be. Is it possible that our questions need adjustment? Among all the things that we struggle with to make our way in the world, which God understands, God is ever pressing his question on us. “Who do

you say that I am?” Could we entertain the notion that our answer to his question profoundly shapes everything else about life?

And I can't help but note the personal aspect of the question; it is 'I – you' in nature. It isn't me asking you about what you think of Jesus. It is Jesus, in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, asking you personally, who do you say that I am? We have noted before that the individuals in 'I – you' relationships are unsubstitutable. As a father I have relationships with my children and while each is a parent-child relationship, each one is unique. The relationship that two people have is uniquely the relationship those two can forge. So it is with God and anyone. Jesus asks each of us this question because only the two of us—Jesus and each person—can have the relationship the two of us can forge. This is what faith is...this relationship.

2. In response to Peter's confession—and we understand Peter to be asserting the conviction of all the Apostles—Jesus said, “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, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” The Greek name 'Peter' is the word 'rock'. In his response Jesus is affirming that Peter is correct in his declaration about Jesus' identity. His answer was rock solid and on this rock the church is built. Now to be clear, we can't separate Peter's answer from Peter as if he merely scored correctly on some quiz. This came from Peter's heart as it must from each of us. The church is built as people come to know, trust, and confess what Peter confesses about Jesus. If Jesus is Lord to confess it means he is my Lord.

Please take note of Jesus' promise, “I will build my church.” I recall a conversation a few years ago with another minister about the decline in the church in Canada. He asked me what gave me hope. The answer sprang from this text...it is the Lord's church and he will build it. I have seen many programmes that purport to advise what it takes to have a growing church. And to be a welcoming people is certainly part of that story and offering programmes to introduce Christian faith are good things. However, it is our Lord who builds as he calls people to himself—we are to bear witness to him. Let your interest in people be genuine for their sake. None of us like it when someone takes an interest in us just to sell us something and when we don't buy their interest evaporates. Let our love be genuine, says the scripture. Pray to the Lord of the harvest to build his church.

On that Pentecost day “those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized” in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the faith. A

sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In baptism, the baptized welcome Peter's message that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour. It is to say that I belong to Him. And ever since that day the church has been doing the same. Those who welcome this message are baptized. (as we are doing today).

It is also important to note that while the commitment to Jesus is personal it isn't merely personal. The baptized were added to the church. Jesus turns us to himself and to one another. A churchless Christian is, biblically speaking, a contradiction in terms. Jesus' clear intention is that his followers would join together in community. It is clear (1) from his promise to build his church; (2) from his formation of the Apostles as a group walking in company together with him; (3) from his command, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another:" and (4) from what the Apostles did in obedience to Jesus in forming churches. To love Jesus is to love what he loves; and he loves his church. Walking with others in Christian faith is essential to our faith. Those days when we come to church and find it hard to sing because of the blows of life we need our sisters and brothers to sing for us.

The Apostles' Creed was first articulated around 150 A.D. The various lines have Biblical precedent and were statements they considered that all the Apostles would assert. Its design was so the church would remain on a Christian trajectory founded on the Apostolic confession. We have already noted that we confess we believe in the communion of saints. We also confess we believe in "the holy catholic Church." Many protestants stumble over the word 'catholic.' Please note that is a lower case 'c' catholic. The term "catholic" does not refer to any specific denomination or group of Christians. The term comes from two Greek words that together mean "throughout the whole." This single word, "catholic," means throughout all time and places and also points to the essential unity or wholeness of the church in Christ.

My point to you is that the church, as a body of people in the world, is a matter of our faith commitment, according to Jesus and the Apostles. There is one line in the creed about God the Father, seven lines about Jesus, one about the Holy Spirit and two about the church. The Apostles' didn't consider the church to be incidental to the story of God in the world. It is our Lord's purpose in having a people for himself to build his church—the work we are called to share in with our Lord.

3. In summary form Peter's sermon that Pentecost day did what we have been doing in our fall study looking at the big picture of the Bible. Peter's sermon is crafted on the understanding that this grand narrative of the Bible culminates in God coming among us in Jesus of Nazareth. People that day asked him how they should respond to this great news. Peter said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Have you welcomed Peter's message?

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.