

Sermon: "Jesus and His Church"

Deseronto United Church Anniversary 151 years
2019

October 20,

Ephesians 4:1-6 Matthew 16:13-20

We have a great church.

We gather here in the midst of the people of Christ, to worship, to pray, to give thanks, to ask for God's guidance, and to remember God's goodness to us through so many years.

I know that you may not feel that we are worshiping today in a great church. We have been having enough discussions lately about whether we are going to continue to be church in the future; according to our treasurer Dianna's report last week, she estimated that we have only a few months left before the money runs out.

For this anniversary sermon, I want us to broaden our viewpoint, to take us beyond the old red brick walls of Deseronto United Church to the Church Universal.

There are different meanings for the word, "church." 'Church' can mean the building in which we sitting today. 'Church' can mean the people inside the building. 'Church' can also mean the worldwide Church, all the people everywhere who say they are followers of Jesus Christ.

This last meaning is the meaning we find in the Apostle's Creed when it says "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, etc." In that context 'the holy catholic church'

does not mean Roman Catholic, it means the universal church, the church that includes all Christians everywhere.

When I think of that church, I do say with confidence, that we have a great church. The church, our church, spread out from a small group of stumbling friends of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, to every corner of our globe. In the days after the crucifixion of Jesus, if anyone had predicted the future of that little band of middle eastern followers, it would have been fool-hardy to believe that they would have a future at all. They were scared, they were demoralized, they were in hiding. Their leader had been executed by the state. And yet, they did have a future. They had a glorious future. That tiny, fledgling church, before it was even called 'church' had a glorious future.

I have traveled a bit around the world, as some of you have also traveled. Much of my traveling has been church related. I have worshiped in a tiny building on the beach of the Indian Ocean, where the whole worship service took all morning, partly because we worshiped in two languages, and every sentence was repeated twice. I have gathered with a base Christian community in Nicaragua sitting on uncomfortable plastic chairs, in the really hot sun, and listened to how they work to make the gospel real in their own context. I have wept from anguish and weariness as Christians in the Philippines described how Christians are persecuted, imprisoned and executed solely because they are Christians. I have seen some of the great cathedrals of England – Westminster, Durham, Salisbury. I have toured the national cathedral in the Washington, DC, and seen the plaques with names engraved on them of those who founded that church. Many years ago, I gathered with people from all over the world in St Peter's Basilica, at

the Vatican, filled with awe and amazement at the size and grandeur of that space.

I am struck by how these diverse churches in vastly different parts of the world read the same Bible we read, sometimes the exact same passages that we read Sunday by Sunday. I have also worshiped in many, many United Churches all over this country, and sometimes I am blown away to walk into a church for the first time, and find a worship service that feels exactly the same as our worship service. All these churches all over the world, they worship the same Saviour we worship, a simple teacher and miracle worker who lived 2,000 years ago. That's the great and unlikely church I am talking about. A church which reads the same Bible, a church that worships the same God, a church which struggles with the same questions, a church which sings some of the same hymns. Wherever you go in the world, when you see the sign of the cross, you know what it means. There are other symbols that get our attention – the water of baptism, the bread and the chalice; for some people the symbol of the fish or maybe the symbol of the crown of thorns speaks volumes. Wherever you see them, you know the Church of Jesus Christ is present.

This is our church.

Saying this, it might surprise you to know that the word, 'church,' is used in only two places in the four gospels. One of those mentions is the passage from Matthew 16 which was read for you. "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." It makes me chuckle to think that Jesus gave Peter the responsibility for building his church – that's unstable, hot and cold, impetuous Peter, he was given the responsibility for building Christ's church.

Knowing Peter's flaws, and also his deep devotion to Jesus, it should not surprise us that the road the Christian church has followed is uneven. We have our ups and downs, we have our struggles, we have had moments of deep failure as a church, and we also have our moments of wonderful faithfulness and holy service and unbelievable bravery.

What does all this have to do with us today in Deseronto United Church on our 151st anniversary?

Well, this: the church of Jesus Christ is not failing.

We here in Deseronto, we are struggling, our traditions are fading away, we are acutely conscious of loss all the time. Sometimes the gloom and doom for our church is all we can see. Perhaps it will help us to feel a little more confident to lift our eyes above the worries of today, and remember that Christ's church is still strong. In some places in Latin America, or Africa or the South Pacific, the church of Christ is growing at a remarkable rate. Our local expression of Christ's church is one small branch on a very large tree.

"There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all."

This God and Father of all still abides with us, as he has in the past, as he abides in the present, as He will abide into the future. This is our hope and our promise. The survival of the church is not entirely up to us. This is the church of Jesus Christ, and if Jesus Christ is present, it is by definition, the church, His Church.

Remember some of those other beautiful Bible verses which promise Christ's presence with us?

“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Mt 28:20

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even they die, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” Jn 11:25

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe God, believe also in me.” Jn 14:1

“The Lord is good and his love endures forever, his faithfulness to all generations.” Ps 100:5

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.” Is 43:1-2

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:6-7)

Or even Mary’s breathless, “I have seen the Lord!” after she meets the resurrected Jesus in the garden.

The Lord promises to be with us, and to the best of my knowledge, the Lord has not reneged on that promise. On this anniversary Sunday, that is my message, it’s that simple. The future of Deseronto United Church is indeed precarious, we know that. But the

Lord of life, the Lord of salvation, the Lord of resurrection is still among us.

The Apostle's Creed, page 918 in VU