

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 16:13-20
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
August 24, 2008

“No Building Permit Required”

For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed people watching. Sitting on a bench along the boardwalk and watching people as they stroll in and out of shops, discipline or not their children or even laugh inside at the antics people go through. I get the same excitement walking in the mall or along a street. Watching people and what they do fascinates me. Watching a congregation from this perspective is interesting! And what about the person in the car that pulls up alongside you at a red light? These days drivers are putting on make-up, shaving, talking or texting on the phone, brushing their hair, or even looking at you. As I watch people, I wonder what kind of person they might be. The girl walking in the mall with multiple piercing's or the young man with his pants almost down to the ground or what about the person riding a motorcycle wearing a muscle shirt and arms covered in tattoos. First impressions can be deceiving. We might think or say it's not what's on the outside that matters, but what is on the inside. How do you know what is on the inside if you don't take the time to get to know someone? The stereotypes that society has taught seem to get in the way of knowing someone.

Would you know Jesus if you were to come face to face with him? What if while you were in the mall you saw a man in long flowing white robes, shoulder length hair, and wearing sandals, would you believe it to be Jesus or would you ask yourself, “Who is that guy?. What is he trying to prove?” As you look around, you see other people doing the same thing. You can see the mouths moving as everyone tries to figure him out. Maybe someone in the growing crowd recognizes him and starts to tell those around you how he heals the sick, cures the lame, feeds the hungry, he is an advocate for the downtrodden, he eats with the poor, he knows more about you than yourself....

I sense Jesus was experiencing something similar when he was in Caesarea Philippi. He probably knew people were talking about him, but did they know him. So he asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They quickly respond, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” By this time, Jesus knew his earthly life was nearing the end. He wanted to make sure there were some around who knew who He was and that they could continue to work for the kingdom of God. Hence the questions. The disciple's quick responses show that some thought Jesus to be as

great as John the Baptist. Maybe he had come back from the dead. Still others thought he was Elijah, considered by many to be the greatest of the prophets or maybe he was a new prophet. The bottom line, Jesus was testing his closest followers, to find out if they knew the truth of the Christian faith or would all His work come undone once Jesus was no longer among them.

It is interesting to note the place where this questioning took place, Caesarea Philippi located about twenty-five miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. The area was ruled by Herod of Antipas and Philip the tetrarch and the population was predominately non-Jewish. Jesus knew here, he could talk openly without the Jewish leaders looking over his shoulder. Here he could give instructions to the twelve disciples. This area was also scattered by a large number of temples of the Syrian Baal gods; a place where the ancient pagan religion flourished. Because Caesarea Philippi was in a valley it was also thought to be the birthplace of the ancient god Pan, the god of nature. In the great hill next to the city, was a deep cavern filled with water thought to be a spring that fed into the Jordan River. This cavern was so deep, that with the longest measuring instrument, could not reach the bottom. But the greatest sign in the area was the enormously large white marble temple build by Caesar. A sign of the emperors power and might. This foreboding building could be seen for miles. A city with a huge temple built on a mountain containing an ever-flowing source of water.

I imagine Caesarea Philippi to be a historic city, one with a lot of importance; a place where a penniless, homeless Galilean carpenter and twelve ordinary men were stationed, while in the adjoining town the Jewish orthodox leaders were plotting to destroy Jesus. A place where the ancient Syrian gods reigned and here where Jesus, the Son of Man questions his closest followers. Surrounded by signs of the past and Jesus is wondering if his teachings mattered. Was Jesus able to teach the disciples what it meant to live in the truth? He asks the question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" This time it is not who do THEY say that I am, but YOU. His closest followers and advisors are now on the hot seat.

Who answers the direct question, Peter? The one who seems to always be in the hot seat; remember, he is the one Jesus dared to walk on the water, he is the one who will deny knowing Jesus during his trial. Here Peter is again at the forefront. What is Peter's response, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Wow, Jesus has found someone who understands. The work of Jesus would now be safe for the future. And Jesus responds, "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.” Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

On you Peter, I will build my church. Peter, the one who has been questionable in the minds of many is to be the foundation of the Church; the stronghold for the believers in Jesus; the one on which to build the future. But Jesus says to him, it is because you have come to believe through my father in heaven, not through the flesh and blood of others. It is God who has worked in you to be a believer in the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter has discovered his personal relationship with Jesus. Peter realized that it had to be the work of God for him to know the truth about his relationship with Jesus.

Peter, has become the rock of our salvation; the solid foundation for a relationship in Jesus on which the church will build. For me the question becomes what is the church? I know I often say, “I’m going to church” meaning to travel to this building where believers gather to worship and praise God. For many of us, I think that is the image we maintain as church; a building. Even when we want to show off who we are as church, we usually show a picture of a building. We are delighted to show others where we worship, where we do God’s work, where we present ourselves to be cleansed in the righteousness of God, where the waters of baptism flow and make us whole.

When an organization wants to build a structure of some sort, building permits are required. This congregation I’m sure needed to secure permits before any remodeling or new construction could begin; permits that local governing authorities required to ensure the building met certain specifications. They wanted a guarantee that the building would be safe and secure. As with everything in life, there was a price to pay for that fee. Generally, that fee is a percentage of the total cost of the project. Looking around there were pieces of rock used to build this building; rocks that were likely very large at first, but chiseled into smaller pieces so that a structure could be built. The foundation of this building probably has many rocks to support it. Rocks of differing sizes and shapes; held together with mortar, a glue-like substance to keep everything in a particular shape. A structure complete with floor, ceilings, walls and furnishings to make it comfortable.

Jesus told Peter, “on this rock, I will build my church.” There was no structure present, just Peter and the other disciples. It was on Peter, the church would be laid. Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah, as the one sent by God therefore, the church had a foundation, not on Peter, but Peter’s belief and faith that Jesus was the Messiah. So it is with the church today. The church is not a

building, rather a group of persons like Peter; a people that feels tempted every day, challenged by God, feeling not worthy but knowing that Jesus is the Messiah; the one who will change lives.

I would like us to think for a moment. Do you know about Jesus or do you know Jesus? Since a child we hear the familiar bible stories; the Good Samaritan, the healings that Jesus performs, the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead by Jesus, the walking on water, the feeding of the five thousand. These are the stories that shape our lives about Jesus. Sometimes when I recount such stories I get a feeling of wow, Jesus can do all that. A feeling of something that is far greater than I can imagine. In the true sense of the word a divine intervention of sorts. But does that mean I KNOW Jesus? I know about Jesus, but where is Jesus in my life. Christianity never consists in knowing about Jesus; it always consists in knowing Jesus. Jesus Christ demands a personal verdict. A sense of know the real presence among each of us.

Do you know Jesus or do you know about Jesus? Jesus is present in each of our lives. Jesus touches us in many and varied ways. Sometimes we easily recognize it, and at other times it is difficult to realize. I know I struggle to see Jesus at times. And it is in those times that my faith feels challenged the most that I wonder where Jesus is. When life is good, we are quick to recognize the presence of God through Jesus Christ, but when things don't go our way, that real presence seems to be missing. All of us in this place are the church. We gather as one in the body of Christ to share in the life, love and joy of knowing Jesus Christ in our hearts.

Paul writes, "we who are many, are one body of Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Individually we know Christ; together we are the body of Christ; a body that gives life to itself, but more importantly to others. Each of us has different gifts; gifts that differ according to the grace given us. Together working in the world to make Jesus known to others. Look at the person next to you. That person is Jesus. That individual gives you life, and if you believe that, then you know Jesus. In knowing Jesus, you recognize the gifts of God in each other. When you are people watching the next time, look at that person who doesn't look like you as Jesus. Think about what that person gives to you. Do you make Jesus to look like yourself or do you recognize Jesus differently?

Is there a building permit required to build the church? No. The permit was purchased on a cross. The price was paid by Jesus' death. He took death from us

so that we might have an eternal life in God. In his death and resurrection we are given a new life; a life to build the kingdom of God. “Yet in this house, an earthly frame, Jesus the children is blessing; hither we come to praise his name, faith in our Savior confessing. Jesus to us his Spirit sent, making with us his covenant, granting his children the kingdom. Through all the passing years, O Lord, grant that when church bells are ringing, many may come to hear your Word, who here this promise is bringing: “I know my own, my own know me; you, NOT the world, my face shall see; my peace I leave with you. Amen.” Amen.