

## Church

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 51:1

Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 16:13-20

Once I grabbed that diploma at Mizzou's commencement, I did what every degreed, single, and adventurous young bachelor would do in such a moment. I went to New York City with my mother. She was 50, 5'nothing, and possessed a fierce streak of stubborn once she had her mind made up. I was 22, and not just all that confident that this was a good idea, but it was New York City. I hadn't been and I wasn't paying.

I knew something was a bit off in the planning when she said we had reservations in the city that never sleeps at the Travelodge Motel. A discount motor lodge in Manhattan? New York is not exactly a Tom Bodet "We'll leave a light on for you" kind of city. So, we "traveled" to our "lodge" which was located on a street dominated more by strip clubs than Broadway lights. Needless to say, our suite at the Travelodge was most surely only one inspection away from being condemned. It was the kind of place that when you arrive, you receive two towels, a bar of soap, and a roll of crime scene tape.

Nevertheless, mom was determined to make a go of it, and somehow we did. We saw Jason Robards in *You Can't Take It with You*, and for mom, the highlight was getting half-price tickets to *A Chorus Line*, during its first record-setting run on Broadway. Have you seen it? The show begins with a line of dancers on an empty half-lit stage. As the title suggests, they are there to audition for a spot in the chorus line of an upcoming Broadway musical, every one of the dancers having a story to tell and a dream to chase. The staccato music ramps up as the dancers are feverishly trying to learn the assigned steps for the audition. And interspersed between the dance moves and the director barking instructions, the energy of the chorus reverberates. “God, I hope I get it; I hope I get it. How many people does he need ... God, I'll never make it; I'll never make it. He doesn't like the way I look; he doesn't like the way the way I dance...” (Hamlisch/Kleban, *A Chorus Line*)

It's a show charged with energy, pressure, anxiety, fear, pathos, and insecurity ... but in a most entertaining way. It's about a longing to belong, a desire to have some acknowledgement of a place in this world, that you are part of a community. That most basic human need is at the heart of how we live our days. It is the driver behind what we do, how we live, where we plant ourselves, and to what and with whom we seek to be rooted. At some

level, every one of us is that vulnerable and exposed dancer on a stage auditioning for what may become that something you can say you're a part of. "God, I hope I get it; I hope I get it. How many people does he need ... I'll never make it. He doesn't like the way I look; he doesn't like the way the way I dance..."

It is a yearning so deep and profound that when not realized, we'll grasp at anything that offers some sense of connection, of acceptance, of place, even if that anything or that anyone is toxic or cruel or offers nothing more than a path of self-destruction, or worse, violence. Disaffected young men in post-WWI Germany, demoralized and rootless, found common cause in the pursuit of masking their humiliation with bravado, blame, prejudice, and the myth of superiority. From Brownshirts in beer halls to swastikas and concentration camps, they found their community and connection in hate, brutality, and murder. Late in '69's summer of love, disaffected youth in the canyons of Southern California found their sense of self and validation and connection in the sway of a charismatic madman named Manson who led them on a killing spree that shocked the nation.

From the horrific to the trendy to the ridiculous to the fable of the like-minded we're always reaching for that thread of connection, that hint of validation and acceptance, that light of recognition, that comfort of claimed identity. We throw all that energy and attention into that one thing that holds even the possibility of offering it. Two-a-days in August heat, the camaraderie of the locker room, over-testosteroned banter in the weight room, Trips Left 383 Y Stick Bagel Z Post — a whole culture centered on an odd-shaped ball and a goal-line. A young gymnast moves a thousand miles away from home to get connected to a culture and coach that may, with years of hard, tortuous work, give her 16 Olympian days of name recognition, acceptance, and validation.

Why, we'll pursue anything if it offers even a taste of these things. Recently, I turned on a sports channel and they were broadcasting a match in the (listen closely) Professional Pillow Fighting Championship. They climb into a ring complete with turnbuckles and ropes, all cocky and full of swagger, and they're swinging their *Tempur-Pedics* at each other. And people are in bleachers who have paid to watch it. But if that's not your thing, maybe you'd prefer the professional cornhole league, or maybe you can pursue (dare I say it because it may hit pretty close to home for some of

you), but maybe you could qualify for a spot on the professional pickleball circuit.

What affinity group will stake a claim on your spirit? In what will you find your identity, your purpose? What nouns will distinguish your obituary? These questions leap out from the conversation Jesus has with his disciples as they enter the fertile district of Caesarea Philippi, some 25 miles north of the sea of Galilee at the base of Mt. Hermon. It is the location of one of the largest springs feeding the Jordan River and was known as a place teeming with a diversity of religious worship, particularly worship associated with Pan, the god of the wild. Later, Herod the Great built a temple there dedicated to Caesar Augustus. As such, it provided a logical backdrop for Jesus' question of what or who forms the core of our identity.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus isn't looking for poll numbers here, or some concrete evidence that his favorability ratings are spiking. Rather, Jesus is setting up the contrast between those things the world seeks after and the new reality to

which Jesus is calling his disciples. Obviously, looking around, the disciples could see temples and statues dedicated to mythic figures, military heroes, and charismatic rulers. People would make pilgrimages to claim connection to or affiliation with these figures — sacrifices to Pan, veneration of Caesar, etc.

Go into someone's office and you'll note the affiliations they value. There's his photo with the President; there's her selfie with Michael Jordan; there's her sorority composite; his college degree; her medal from the marathon; their Megan Rapinoe jersey. We all have these mementos. Walk in my office and in addition to family photos, you'll see Cardinals' memorabilia, Mizzou paraphernalia, and even a couple of *Hot Wheels* representing the cars I've driven.

Like the poster projects teachers will assign you at the beginning of the school year, such mementos offer a glimpse into the associations and connections that you value, and there's certainly nothing wrong with that, at least until those associations transgress things like the sixth commandment, or the call to love thy neighbor. I'll give a Cubs fan a hard time, but I won't wish her ill will. Certainly, there is an impassable canyon of

difference between the ebullience of the Taylor Swift fan club and the malevolence of the Proud Boys. Yet, Jesus calls us here to examine all our affiliations in the context of our ultimate identity in him, in Jesus.

John the Baptist was a peerless prophet; Elijah was instrumental to Israel's journey, but Jesus is not just "the first among equals." I first heard that title when a group I traveled with was granted an audience with the Patriarch of Constantinople, the orthodox archbishop of the New Rome. His associates appeared quite insistent about his place among the other patriarchs as "the first among equals." Not long after our visit, there was to be a meeting of the Patriarchs in Crete, a meeting that unraveled over the seating arrangements, specifically whose seats would convey the most prominence. Certainly, history has revealed that the church is not immune to siloing, factionalism, and pride of association, but what Matthew reveals to us is our loyalty to any group cannot be equal to, or even compete with our loyalty to Jesus Christ. We serve not an association, club, team, gang, affinity group, or movement, or idea; we worship and serve and find our identity in Jesus Christ, distinct, divine, and above all else.

Peter, for all his faults, gets this one right. When Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus is not first among equals, not a preference among equivalent options, and is certainly not formed in our image. In his Gospel, John declares that, “Jesus was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Jesus Christ is our ultimate authority and the ground of our being and the source of our identity. To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that all authority is subject to his authority. And because of what God accomplished in Christ, no one can ever say that they have no identity or possess no connection, or live unacknowledged and unaccepted. You are always Christ’s. You are not alone. You are valued by God.

Jesus says to Peter, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” As such, Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and in spite of the institutional church’s missteps, sins, and failures, the Church as instituted by Christ will not be destroyed. Theologian Leslie Newbiggen said, “The Church has outlasted



many occupants of Caesar's throne and will outlast more, for the truth entrusted to her is the truth of God."

Because all things came into being through this word made flesh, this redeemer of creation, Jesus understands precisely why we need this thing called church, for Jesus knows we were not created to be alone. Drawn by Christ into community we are to be a place of welcome, a visible, tangible, accessible representation of the grace, mercy, and peace of our Lord.

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams observed that, "The church is a community that exists because something has happened that makes the entire process of self-justification irrelevant. God's truth and mercy have appeared in concrete form in Jesus and, in his death and resurrection, have worked the transformation that only God can perform, told us what only God can tell us: that he has already dealt with the dreaded consequences of our failure, so that we need not labor anxiously to save ourselves and put ourselves right with God." (Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens*)

I like the way the late contemporary theologian Rachel Held Evans pointed out how the church in all its flawed and fleeting glory and ignominy tells us what God's kingdom is like: "a bunch of outcasts and oddballs

gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes, and there's always room for more." (Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*)

I was bemused by a column in this week's Washington Post. The writer observed the decline of the modern church, echoing a host of other columnists, sociologists, and researchers who spotlight the rise of the nones, those who identify with no religion.

That's no new phenomenon, throughout history the church has known both prosperity and poverty, progress and regression, faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Yet, as it is recognized in the Confession of 1967, the church "does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God."

However, like many disappointed in the church's failures historically and its complicity in observable injustices, the writer from the Post said he drifted from his roots in the church, deciding it was just too fraught with complexity and division and disappointment to trouble with. And yet, he

knows something is missing. He's exploring all kinds of ways to have church without the faith component, sort of like the time as a kid I ordered Pecan pie without the pecans. You know, sort of a *let's do church without the stress of the whole Jesus thing*.

Without Jesus there is no church, because the church is the body of Christ. We desperately need community, connection, and purpose, but apart from our Redeemer we cannot hold together. For it is in the selfless love of Christ alone that we can manage to put up with each other, live with one another, and serve with one another as a healing balm in a wounded world. Again, Rachel Held Evans offers insight into what it means to be one in Christ, what it means to be the church. "One of the most destructive mistakes we Christians make is to prioritize shared beliefs over shared relationship, which is deeply ironic considering we worship a God who would rather die than lose relationship with us." (Rachel Held Evans Blog) The church's one foundation is always, Jesus Christ her Lord. Amen.