

The Next 100

*A sermon preached on Matthew 16:13-20 on Sunday, May 3, 2026,
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I.

An old preacher named Ernest Fitzgerald used to tell stories of the wonderful and colorful people he met when serving a little mountain church way back in the hills where North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia come together. Some of the finest people on earth, as Ernest said, with the very best phrases you'll hear on any day, like "tooth dentist" or "drinkin' liquor." He asked a man once why he used that phrase, since liquor is made to be drunk. The man answered: "Oh no, preacher, you don't understand. There's drinkin' liquor and sellin' liquor, and you don't ever want to get the two confused." That pattern of phrases with two seemingly-redundant words showed up even in their congregation, when members would say, "We're having a Bible Study at the church house," or "It's time for spring revival at the church house." Ernest didn't use that phrase, and one time, his curiosity got the better of him, and he asked one of the men of the church, "Why do you use that phrase? Why don't you just say, 'We're going to the church'?" To which the man answered, "Reverend, the building we meet in is just the house. It ain't a church till Jesus and the people get there."¹

II.

It really has been such a meaningful nine months to celebrate our *church house*: these gorgeous walls and gilded halls that place us here on Fifth Street and give our community a home. Thank you to our 100th Anniversary Task Force and Mary Kaylor for bringing this history to life! From stories

¹ As quoted by Rev. Dr. Michael Brown in his 2008 Easter sermon at Centenary United Methodist Church.

heard to testimonies shared, pictures unearthed to pictures taken (today!), hours served to hours spent, it has been the kind of celebration that has legs, that has spilled into our worship and fellowship, discernment and care. Maybe these months have made you a history buff, and you're now one who remembers some fun facts about our history, like the original cost of the chandelier (\$4000, under which people *still* don't like to sit!), or the type of leaf that dots the tops of these green columns (in a nod to our old local crop, tobacco leaves!). Or maybe you're like me who has found your way in here many times throughout these months, thinking about 100 years of prayers prayed, and songs sung, and meals shared, and members blessed, baptized, married, ordained, and eulogized. But as we conclude this season of celebration and memory and look ahead to the next 100 years and all to come after that, perhaps there's not a better exhortation than this one to send us forward: "the building we meet in is just the house. It ain't a church till Jesus and the people get there."²

III.

I doubt the gospel writer, Matthew, had that frame of mind when telling this story, but to my ears, it sure does fit. For in today's passage, we find the first use in the gospels of the word we translate as "church." Jesus is talking with his disciples, and opens with a question: "Who do people say that I am?" Their responses convey the range of mystery about his identity. "Some say John the Baptist," they respond. "Others Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." But then Jesus turns to Peter and asks the question that cuts right to the heart: "but who do you say that I am?" It's always been leading here, this life and ministry of Jesus, who looks at each individual and asks: *Who do*

² Ibid.

you say that I am? What have you experienced about me in the contours of your heart? What does my life mean to yours? So Peter, say with your lips... who am I to you?

I think Peter speaks for us all when he says the gospel plainly: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” You are the anointed one, the one we’ve been waiting for, the liberator that has come to finally set all people free. Baptists especially favor this question, for it is a moment of personal confession, the question no one else can answer for us, the invitation at the core of our freedom of conscience.³ For Peter and every person since, it reveals a faith that is as personal and individual as the answer that spills out.

“Upon you, Peter,” Jesus responds, “you imperfect human, you ‘deny me and sink into the sea’ human,⁴ upon you, Peter – *Petros* – this rock – *petra* – I will build my church – my *ekklesia*.” Jesus reminds Peter and the rest of us that faith isn’t simply, though, about Christ being in you, but also you being in Christ. Faith is about the togetherness of faith, not just its individual expression, that binds us as members of Christ’s body, about what we can’t or shouldn’t do alone.⁵ *Be assured*, he seems to say. The gates of hell will not prevail. The keys of the kingdom will be yours. Meaning: the space and authority of my church matter to God. When you bind and loose, when you succeed and fail, what the set apart, “gathered and scattered church” will do means that you will be tethered always to the God who gives you life. There is no church without Jesus or the people, and Peter, in all his humanity, was the first stone.

³ Thanks to George Mason for his sermon on this topic, “The Persuaded Church: Convictional Faith and Faithful Community,” *Word Made Fresh: Preaching God’s Love for Every Body*, p254.

⁴ Thomas Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p186.

⁵ Mason, p255.

IV.

When I think about Peter, I can't help but to remember that great quote from Martin Copenhaver, who said, "to me, the affirmation that God can be found outside the church [in nature, in birdsong, in the mountains] has never seemed much of a claim. [Because, of *course* God is outside the church!] The true wonder is that God can be found *inside* the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another... God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, 'here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere.'"⁶

It's astonishing when you really think about it, isn't it? That Jesus built his church, this membership of a body, not with bricks and marble and gilded tobacco leaves and nice white carpet whose coffee stains never fully come out. Rather, the church, Christ's living witnesses on this earth, is built with people! Humans! You and me and all who came behind us and all who will come ahead!

Didn't Jesus know how much we'd screw it up? Certainly he did. Did he look at Peter and think that he'd figure out how to do it just right? Not a chance. Just a handful of verses later, "Jesus will stub his toe on that same rock," as Peter, the cornerstone of the church, will start arguing with Jesus.⁷ "Get behind me Satan," Jesus will say, "you are a stumbling block in my path." Jesus never said the plan was perfect.

⁶ Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, p232.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven*, p72.

But it's on this relationship, this holy ground between heaven and earth, divine and human, that the lasting witness to God's work of Love on earth will be built. It's on this imperfect yet hopeful person called Peter, who might as well be called Alfred Holland or Phyllis Gates or D. Rich or Robert or Nancy or Ray or Jane. It's in the inherently human community of souls that God in Christ builds the church, and that truth matters when we look carefully at ourselves as the ones who live in the church house together. For it is in the shelter of each other that the people live.⁸

On the days we wish the Lord had just found himself a sturdy set of bricks instead of us, let's remember this good word, again from Barbara Brown Taylor: "if Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness – that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time than we fall."⁹

V.

My sermon title for today was called "The Next 100," so if you came here today hoping to hear a prediction of what the next 100 years will hold for our church, I'm afraid I'll disappoint you a bit. From global conflict to local change, swirling questions of economy, ecology, and what it even means to be human at all, not a one of us can predict the future that lies ahead for us and for our church: not for one year, much less a hundred. But what a relief!

⁸ Irish proverb

⁹ Brown Taylor, p74.

But in the absence of prediction, I can make a proclamation. That if our congregation holds fast to the good news of Jesus Christ and lets that good news into the very marrow of who we are, and how we are, and where we are, and what we are, then everything will flow from that. Our preaching and teaching and marching and praying and serving and questioning and birthing and burying and shaping and tending will all emerge from the Source of Life himself. So that when the wind's directions toss us to and fro, when the dark night of our souls stains the hope we once carried, when we're not even sure where to get the strength to carry on, we find our way back to the words that have rung out in this hallowed house for a century and echoed throughout all the ages: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. For his steadfast love endures forever."

If we do that, who knows: we might just become a church. For the next 100 years, at least. For such a time as this, for sure. But maybe even until the end of the age.

May it be so! Amen.