

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH
Matthew 16: 13-20
August 21, 2011
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

Simon Peter was ambiguous and volatile, to say the least. Still, the big fisherman was Jesus' choice to be the rock on which his church would be built. We are not called on the basis of our merits, much less our goodness, but on the basis of what God can do with a willing instrument.

There is no such thing as a perfect church. Likewise, there is no such thing as a perfect pastor. There are times when we do great things for God; and there are times when we spend endless hours arguing over matters of no consequence at all. Churches are not beyond taking sides no more than we are apt to take up a cross.

Matthew Fox, who spoke recently in the Denver area, tells the story of a priest who ran a parish in Manhattan. He was dismayed by the empty seats in his church. Where had the people gone? Would advertising help? That would be very expensive in Manhattan. Some churches do advertise. But they spend an enormous amount for each new person they attract. Then this priest had an idea. He put an ad in the **New York Times** inviting Christians who felt wounded by the Christian church to come on a Tuesday night to talk about it. He hoped at least thirty would show up. Instead, 450 showed up.

That's disturbing. But people are hurt sometimes in church. How many people who are wounded already turn to the church only to have their wounds deepened? Sometimes it happens. No force from the outside can defeat the church. Most of the damage comes from within. People, even church people, can say and do some cruel things.

You are worshipping in a church that is very important to the plan of God. If we knew who we are and how much depends on us, we would be

transformed into a different kind of body altogether. We are those who are called to be light and salt to the world. We are those who are called to be the living embodiment of Christ in the world. We are those for whom Christ gave his life. We are the church of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”**

They replied, **“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”**

Isn't it interesting that some people thought Jesus was John the Baptist? Herod had recently beheaded John the Baptist. And yet some of the people thought that Jesus was none other than John the Baptist come back to life. Why would they think that?

Perhaps because Herod, who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist, was confused by Jesus' appearance and wondered himself, if Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mark 6:16). Even Origen, one of the early church fathers, who had great influence, suggested that since Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins, perhaps they looked alike.

The disciples report to Jesus that some of the people are saying he is John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

“But what about you?” Jesus asked. **“Who do you say I am?”**

Simon Peter answered, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

Jesus replied, **“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”**

This is one of the central passages in scripture. Time does not permit me to say all that can be said about this scripture. But I want to focus on these words: Jesus says, **“On this rock, I will build my church.”**

That's one of the primary reasons Jesus came into the world; to build his church? Of course, we know he also came **“to die for our sins”** and **“to show**

us what God is like” or to “teach us a better way.” But his first action following his baptism by John and his temptation in the wilderness was to call the first disciples. That was the beginning of the church. He spent three years training his disciples in what they were to do after he would no longer be with them.

From the very beginning Christ devoted the major part of his ministry to building a church--not a church building but a church community. He was a carpenter; therefore he could have built a building if that had been his purpose. But Jesus came to build much more than just a physical edifice. He came to build a spiritual structure that **“the gates of Hades will not overcome.”** What a strong metaphor! Imagine the church as a mighty force for righteousness that protects the weak from the strong. And that church is us--you and me. As Christ’s church, we are the people set apart by God to transform the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God. And this is how we are called to do it.

First of all, we are to model the love of Jesus Christ.

That’s what happened in this church back in the 1960s when the decision was made to enlarge our tent to include all of God’s children. The people in this church knew that they were a part of something significant. And something dramatic happened. The entire community was transformed by the actions of one church. If the church is the hope of the world, we need to witness to Christ’s love within our own fellowship. We need to show the world how Christians can love. We show it in our feeding programs and in our mission outreach.

Second, we need to witness to God’s love for the world.

Our youth just returned from their mission trip to the west coast. They got a chance to worship at Glide Memorial UMC. The vision of Cecil Williams is still alive and at work in the San Francisco community where the church serves the entire community. It’s a church for the rich and the poor; the vagrant, the homeless and even those who have no use for the church at all. Glide is a real church for real people.

I once heard it said that a church can either be a cruise ship or a battleship. On a cruise ship, everyone expects to be waited on and entertained. But on a battleship, everyone is trained for a specific job and works with others as a team.

How about our church? Does that describe Park Hill? Are we a cruise ship or a battleship? For our next centennial, let it be said that Park Hill UMC was a battleship leading the battle against prejudice, hunger, aids and HIV. Yes, a church that dismantled the gates of Hades. That is our calling; it is our reason for being.

If you believe you have been called to be a witness to God's presence in the world by loving one another and by loving the world for which Christ died, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for you to experience the Kingdom of God right there at Park Hill UMC.