

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Freed to Build the Beloved Community

Matthew 16:13-20

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And 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. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.



DIAGNOSIS: Heart Trouble

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Losing

Jesus tells Peter, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” But in this year of pandemic, the church faces grave challenges. The virus has interrupted our gatherings and forced us out of our buildings. Some congregations dare to gather, but abstain from singing and sacraments per public health advisories. Still, others defiantly play their odds, either emerging miraculously unscathed, or tragically adding to the growing body of super-spreader incidents. While some privileged congregations have the necessary budget and skill to attempt accommodating folks with virtual worship, disadvantaged congregations remain stuck between a rock and a hard place.

At any rate, regardless of whether we bicker and argue about

safety these days, or just scratch our heads in confusion, we can all agree that the church is becoming something we haven't seen before, and we don't know what to make of it. Likewise, when Jesus comes to Caesarea Philippi, folks don't know what to make of him. They struggle to associate him with the familiar: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah. On the other hand, the disciples have been with Jesus day and night and don't fare any better. Finally, Peter has an epiphany and confesses, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Except, what does he think Jesus means by "church" (Gr., ekklesia)?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Losing the Building

We lament losing the Church we knew. Virtual worship doesn't feel like real worship. We all have our powerful emotional attachments—our smells and bells, coffee hours, and choir anthems. But without a sanctuary, nothing feels holy. Months without gathering have left us feeling disconnected from each other. Perhaps we're distressed to discover that without the anchor of having a common place to go each week, we don't seem so motivated to reach out to others as we feel obligated to do, or even to tune in to some manner of worship at all. In our minds we might remember as we've always been taught, that the church is not a building. But somehow our hearts disagree.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Losing Everything

Jesus praises Peter's confession, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." For Peter, it's not what he sees. It's what he hears, and Jesus enters his ears as the living Word of God, the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." But somehow his Word is not enough for us, as if it falls flat outside the brick and wood of our cherished building—our idol—that we have lost. And when being absent from the trappings

somehow causes that Word to lose its power for us, then we lose the kingdom of heaven, which can only be locked from us. In the end, we have lost everything.

PROGNOSIS: Gaining, Freeing, and Building



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Gaining Everything

Except, we have not lost anything, because the good news is that Jesus is still speaking to us. No sanctuary can confine him. By his death and resurrection, Jesus breaks free from time and space, so that nothing can separate us from his love, and no one can be beyond his reach. Especially for a time such as this, he comes at us by any and all means of grace, even our God-forsaken technologies, to build his ekklesia upon the rock of our hearts. And he does it all by giving us his Word: “I forgive you.” By this, Jesus forgives everything, no matter the depths of our sentimental and self-centered fixations.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Freed from Bondage

Jesus tells Peter, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” By the power of the Holy Spirit, we finally recognize that fixating on the church we knew has really just bound us to the past, and diverted our attention.

Now, we behold Jesus releasing all those bonds, and freeing us for worship and service we truly need in such a desperate time as this. After all, we still contend with a dangerous virus that we don't understand. Daily we lament lives lost and widespread suffering. But at the same time, faith fills us with a compassion that overpowers our politics to listen to our neighbors and accommodate their safety.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Building the Beloved Community

Freed from the way things used to be, we behold new life. We reach out in new and simple ways to folks that we only ever saw on Sundays. No longer prevented by distance, we gather scattered friends and strangers. We rejoice at Jesus' word of forgiveness entering the bickering and arguing that was driving us apart, in order to reconcile relationships. And at the end of the day, we laugh at ourselves for not having thought to do any of this already, and we give thanks for what the Spirit has suddenly brought together. Not even the gates of Hades will prevail against that.