

Matthew 16:13-20

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.

“Pillars and Caterpillars”

Matthew 16:13–20

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La Habra UMC

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Francis J. Braceland once told about a great university that built a beautiful new library. It had tall white columns, marble floors, and lovely furnishings. Students, faculty, and staff bragged to the visitors, pointing to the building and said, “This is our new library.” Finally, the librarian placed a sign out front: “This is not the library. The library is inside.”

That is a good word for the church. We may point to our sanctuary, fellowship hall, classrooms, stained glass, or the crosses on the wall and say, “This is our church.” But Jesus reminds us and, as we sang with the children, that the church is not ultimately a building. The church is the people—those who gather in faith, receive God’s grace, and are sent into the world as witnesses to Christ.

The church is not merely where we meet. **The church is who we are becoming in Christ.**

In Matthew 16, Jesus brings his disciples to Caesarea Philippi and asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They answer with the names people are using—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. People have noticed Jesus, but they do not yet understand him fully.

Then Jesus makes the question personal: “But who do you say that I am?” That is the heart of this passage. Not what the crowd says, not what the culture says, not even what your pastor says—although I do hope you listen to your pastor at least once in a while.

Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Faith is revealed by grace. Peter did not arrive at this confession because he was smarter, better, or more spiritual than everyone else. God comes to us before we come to God. God calls, reveals, opens our eyes, and gives grace. Even our ability to recognize Jesus Christ as Lord is itself a gift.

The Messiah, the Son of Man

When Jesus calls himself “the Son of Man,” his words echo Daniel 7, where one like a human being receives authority from God and a kingdom that will not be destroyed. But immediately after today’s passage, Jesus teaches that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be killed, and be raised. He is the Messiah—not of domination, but of humility, sacrifice, and resurrection.

If Jesus really is the Messiah and the Son of the living God, then we cannot simply admire him from a distance. Our lives must begin to change.

Christ Builds His Church

Jesus then says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Christians have interpreted this verse in different ways about the role of Peter, but all can affirm Jesus’ central promise which is.... “I will build my church.” Jesus is the builder and owner of the church.

That truth humbles us when we are tempted to control the church, and it gives us hope when we are afraid the future depends only on us. Peter himself was not naturally rock-solid. He was enthusiastic and fearful, bold and confused, faithful and sometimes completely wrong. Yet Jesus took Peter as he was and transformed him by grace. The Peter who denied knowing Jesus would eventually preach Christ boldly. According to early Christian tradition, Peter was later crucified in Rome and asked to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord; the bold, outspoken disciple had become humble enough to witness to Christ rather than draw attention to himself.

Yes, certainly, Peter became a pillar of the church Christ was building—not because he was perfect, but because God’s grace was at work in him. And that gives us hope. If Jesus can use Peter, Jesus can use any one of us.

We may love this congregation deeply—its sanctuary, memories, friendships, baptisms, weddings, funerals, prayers, and years of faithful service—but the church is not ours to possess. It is Christ’s church, and we are stewards of what belongs to him.

So the church cannot exist merely to preserve itself. The church exists to worship, grow as disciples, love, serve, proclaim the Good News, and go where Christ sends us.

The Keys of the Kingdom

Jesus says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” And we joke about meeting Peter at the Pearly gate. However, we may get surprise when we get to heaven. It may not be Peter who greets us.

So the point I want to focus is.... These keys are not a license to control heaven or decide who is worthy to go in or not. The church is entrusted with the Gospel: to proclaim Christ, teach his way, confront what destroys community, and offer forgiveness and restoration.

The purpose is not exclusion, but restoration. Jesus gives the church keys not so we can lock people out, but so we can open doors of grace.

Think of a church key. It is small, ordinary, and easy to misplace—which may explain why church people spend so much time looking for keys. But in the right hands, a key opens a door. It lets the hungry come in for food, the grieving come in for prayer, children come in for learning, and the lonely come in and discover they are not alone.

The church is wherever God’s people carry the love of Christ into the world.

Pillars And Caterpillars

Paul uses another image for strong Christian leaders. In Galatians 2:9, James, Cephas—Peter—and John are recognized as “pillars.” A pillar carries weight, provides stability, and helps hold a structure together.

Every congregation needs pillars: people who pray, serve, give, encourage, show up, care, and keep going when ministry is difficult. They may not be the loudest or most visible, but they help hold the church together.

An old joke says, “There are two kinds of people in the church: pillars and caterpillars. The pillars hold up the church, and the caterpillars simply go in and out.” It is funny—but perhaps there is truth in it.

A caterpillar is always moving from one place to another. But a caterpillar is also something that has not yet become what it is meant to be. That gives us a more gracious way to hear the image. The question is not whether you attend perfectly or have everything figured out. The deeper question is: Are you letting Christ transform you?

Perhaps the question for us today is not simply, “Are you a pillar or a caterpillar?” We may all claim to be caterpillars than boast about being pillars. Then, we can all ask a better question, “What is Christ transforming you and me into?”

Transformation takes time. A caterpillar does not become a butterfly in a single afternoon, and Christians do not become mature disciples overnight.

But fearful people can become courageous, selfish people can become generous, divided people can become reconcilers, discouraged people can become encouragers, and controlling people can learn to let go and be at peace. Then, ordinary people can become pillars in the church of Jesus Christ.

Unlike the Librian from the story we started with... Christ has not called us merely to come inside the church. Christ has called us to become the church and carry his love outside these walls. As I was preparing this sermon, it dawned on my heart that what we are about to do through livestreaming and social media is one way to reach those who may not come into our church. These are not replacements for the gathered church, but new doors of ministry. Through online worship, livestreams, phone calls, messages, and digital spaces, we can share the Good News with younger generations and with people of every age, so that more people may encounter the grace of Christ.

May the Holy Spirit nourish us. May God’s grace transform us. May the Holy Spirit nourish us. May God’s grace transform us. And may Jesus Christ, the builder and owner of this church, keep transforming us—though caterpillars we may be now— into faithful pillars to hold up God’s kingdom.

Amen.

Congregational Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We offer ourselves to you with open hearts. Make us willing to be changed by your grace, even when transformation is uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Shape us into the church you need us to be in this time and place. Show us what form our life together should take, whom we are called to serve, what we need to release, and what new faithfulness you are inviting us to receive. Build your church in us, through us, and beyond us, so that your love may be made known. Amen.