

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
August 21, 2011  
Matthew 16:13-20

*With grateful hearts we gather here this morning, O God, grateful for your church throughout the world; for the churches that have taught, nurtured, comforted, and inspired us along the way and, today, for this church and the great adventures that lie ahead. Bless us, O God. Bless us to be your bold and faithful people. In Christ we pray. Amen.*

### **“Who Needs a Church?”**

Some of you read Elaine Pagel’s book “Beyond Belief” in the Adult Discussion Group a couple years ago. She opens the book with this poignant story.

*On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a t-shirt and running shorts, I stepped into the vaulted stone vestibule of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York to catch my breath and warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress – the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice.*

*That morning I had gone for an early morning run while my husband and 2 ½ year old son were still sleeping. The previous night I had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors had performed a routine check-up on our son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open heart surgery. The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare lung disease. Disbelieving the results, they tested further for 6 hours before they told us that Mark had a fatal lung disease. How much time? I asked. “We don’t know; a few months, a few years.”*

*The following day a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How will this help? It couldn’t, they explained; but the procedure would let them see how far the disease had progressed. Mark was already exhausted by the previous day’s ordeal. Holding him, I felt that if more masked strangers poked needles into him in an operating room, he might lose heart -literally-and die. We refused the biopsy, gathered Mark’s blanket, clothes and Peter Rabbit, and carried him home.*

*Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there.*

The topic this morning is the church; it’s a topic Jesus didn’t say much about so when he does, as he does in today’s reading from Matthew, people pay attention.

Jesus only speaks of the church twice-here in this passage and once in chapter 18. Jesus and his disciples are nearing the district of Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks them,

rather oddly, what people are saying about him. It's a familiar passage that's told in Mark and Luke as well. But only Matthew includes this part of building his church on the rock.

Because Jesus spoke so rarely of the church, it's led many people to question whether or not he meant to build one. Some say he did and some he didn't. The evidence is rather inconclusive. But what is clear is that Jesus gave the disciples authority to preach, teach, and baptize in his name, which is what they did. It's clear from that Jesus meant to start a movement and have that movement continue after he was gone. And most people know that in order for a movement to have staying power, it's got to be organized. And I think Jesus wanted his movement to have staying power.

So yes, I think he meant to build a church, but I don't think he had any idea how it would all pan out. I think he was concerned with the message and figured the mechanics of it would be worked out later. But I also believe that Jesus was a realist and knew there would be good and bad moments, some silly moments, some embarrassing moments, and some moments where he would feel intense pride when his followers were on the right path.

But the church in American culture can be a funny thing. Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Theological Seminary, is a scholar of it, and she says we have crossed a divide. Before, if you didn't belong to a church you felt obliged to explain yourself.

Now the pressure is to explain why you do.

Wheeler says that when she travels she reads the personal ads in local newspapers and has discovered that "more and more among the undesirable characteristics in a person being sought is organized religion. It's not as bad a smoking but in some parts of the country, it's close." (*Who Needs the Church?*)

Peter Gomes tells the wonderful story of the parents of a Harvard student who made an appointment with him to discuss a problem they were having with their daughter. "And what might the problem be?" Gomes asked. The anxious, worried parents answered somberly: "She's become a Christian and she goes to church on Sunday."

Anne Lamott, a wonderful author who writes extensively about her little Presbyterian Church in California, once wrote that when she would have rather died than tell her friends he had started going to church. Telling her "wonderful, brilliant, left-wing, non-believer friends know that I had begun to love Jesus" wasn't something she thought would go over well. "I think they would have been less appalled if I had developed a close personal friendship with Strom Thurmond," she writes.

But now, she can't imagine her life without her church. ". . . the people I know who are doing well psychologically, who seem conscious, who do not drive me crazy with their endlessly unhappy dramas, the only people I know who feel safe, who have what I want - - connection, gratitude, joy -- are people in community. And this funky little church. It is where I was taken in when I had nothing to give, and it has become in the truest, deepest

sense, my home. My home-base. (<http://www.salon.com>)

Anne knows what many people who *don't* go to church *don't know*, and that is that regularly, mostly quietly, people are lifted up and given new hope, new vision, new life because of the church Jesus built.

Regularly, quietly, week in and week out, this church has done its best to be the kind of church Jesus would want it to be.

Every day this church is occupied from 7 am to dark. Every morning, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, an AA group of 40-50 people meets here. An even larger AA group meets here on Monday night. And now a new AA group meets here on Friday nights. Two nights a week a GA group meets here. "Why do you have so many AA groups," a man asked me last week. "I don't know I said. Maybe because we've never turned one down and we don't charge them anything. It's just what we do; it's how we serve this community." It's what we do, because that's what being the church is all about.

It's the same reason we collect for food for Food Outreach or items for the women and children at Lydia's House or have a community garden. Because that's what a church does.

We provide education classes for adults and teach our kids because that's what the church is all about. We provide a safe nursery for our toddlers and babies because this is the only place they can go to learn that Jesus loves them. And we provide coffee and cookies after church because cookies sweeten the message and coffee and talking with friends does, too. Jesus was on to something when he spent a lot of his time eating and drinking with people. And we try to provide inspiring worship with what we say and what we sing because we know that life can be difficult, but we don't want worship to be, because worship should inspire you to love God and your neighbor as much as God loves you.

Think of how different your life would be without the church; without this church. Of the people you would never have met, the friendships you would never have formed; the great love you would never have experienced. That is God's love that is reflected in the community and shared with other people.

Elaine Pagels, in the opening to her book, goes on to say about that church:

*Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon my child; and here was a community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine.*

Yesterday morning, when all of the teams and committees and leaders of the church came together to plan the year, it was evident that this church strives to be just that sort of church—a place where people can come to sing, celebrate, acknowledge common needs, and deal with life's blows. But also a church where you can feel safe, be who you are, and know that God loves you and accepts you for who you are . . .and so do we.

Who needs a church? I know there are many people who say they do not, but I can say with certainty that my life would be poorer without it. The church is one of God's most precious gifts to us, for it is the place where we can go to find hope, feel loved, acknowledge uncertainties, and feel accepted.

Who needs a church? I do. The world does. Most amazing of all, God does.

Amen.