



Convenient Christians Make Convenient Churches

Matthew 16:21-28

Sunday, August 30th, 2020

First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois

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Text: But Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. (v. 23)

I have a painting of the Cape Hatteras. It was painted by an aunt. I have climbed all 257 to the top of the lighthouse. That may not sound like much, but it is like climbing the steps to the top of a 12 story building. Imagine climbing the steps to the top of the St. Francis Hospital north parking deck. Then climb 5 more stories.

The painting reminds me about why a church, any church, exists. I shared this story before, but I believe that it bears repeating. There are many variations of the story.

Once upon a time, on a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred, there was a crude little lifesaving station. The building was no more than a hut, really. It had only one boat and a few devoted members who kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day and night, tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding community, wanted to be associated with the work of the station. They gave their time, money, and in support of the work. As time passed, new boats were purchased and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station became unhappy because the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge for those saved from the sea. They enlarged the building, replaced the emergency cots with beds and put in better furniture.

With these improvements the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They began to decorate it beautifully with nautical themes. Soon it began to take on the look and the air of a ship captain's study. Fewer members were interested in going to sea and risking their lives on lifesaving missions so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work.

About this time a large ship hit the rocks off the coast. The hired crews brought in lifeboat after lifeboat of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them were foreigners. The beautiful lifesaving station was in chaos.

Shortly afterward the members decided to build a shower house outside of the lifesaving station where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

Before long there was a split within the membership of the life saving station. Most wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities because it was dangerous, messy, dirty and hindered the social life that they grew to enjoy. A small number of members reminded the others that lifesaving was their primary purpose. After all, they were still called a lifesaving station. They were told that if they wanted to save lives that they should just begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. So, they did.

As the years went by, though, history repeated itself. The new lifesaving station lost its passion in saving lives, and another lifesaving station was founded a little further down the coast, too. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of nautically themed lifesaving stations that evolved into exclusive clubs. Of course, shipwrecks happen in those treacherous waters, but today most of the passengers drown.

You see, people no longer wanted to get their hands dirty and take a risk. They wanted to play it safe and comfortable. The biggest regrets in my life are when I wanted to play it safe. The words of Jesus have become truer and truer as I get older and older and the number of my days become less and less.

"Whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever is willing to lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Being risk averse, by that I do not mean being foolishly risky, but playing it safe means that we never get from first base to home plate.

I was reminded of the life saving station story as I read today's gospel lesson. Our lesson immediately follows Jesus' penetrating question, "Who do you say that I am?"

If we say that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior then that means that he has influence in every aspect of our lives; the decisions that we make, the values that we hold, the things that we do and do not do, as well as the words we speak or do not speak.

As Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God", Jesus began to explain what that meant. He would go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful, the status quo, and he would be killed. But, and this is an important "but", his death would not be the end of the story.

I'm not sure that Peter heard that last part. He quit listening at "killed."

"No, no, no, that can't happen. That is not what I meant when I said that you are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Jesus turned on Peter. "Get behind me, Satan, for you are a stumbling block more interested in human things than God things."

I can only imagine the hurt and confusion that must have appeared on Peter's face as well as the face of the others.

The problem with most of us is that we have good intentions and genuine desire but that with the passage of time we become like sheep nibbling grass. The sheep goes from tuft to tuft and before long looks up and wonders how it got lost! It didn't intend to get lost. It just nibbled its way to "lostness". That's the way it is with us. We become lost a little at a time, inch by inch.

In the book *Dangerous Wonder* the late Mike Yaconelli wrote that the most critical issue facing Christians today is not abortion or pornography, or the disintegration of the family or moral absolutes, or school prayer, or any number of things. No, the most critical issue facing us today is dullness. "We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life changing, it is life enhancing." (p. 23) It has become tame rather than challenging and life altering. Yaconelli went on to write,

"What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever he went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?"

Yes, what happened to the kind of Christians who those in power considered to be dangerous? What happened to those who would echo the powerful words of the prophets of old; the words of Amos and Micah.

Woe to you who take advantage of the poor, who treat the alien as nobodies, as if they have no feelings, who use your wealth for your own pleasure and never think of others
Who do not want to be challenged and

Who tip the scales of justice in their favor with their wealth, all the while sending the poor to overcrowded prisons. You give to the needy that which you do not want and expect them to be grateful and lavish "thank yous" upon you.

Do not be fooled. God sees what's going on, and God is not happy.

Divine Revelation revealed to Peter who Jesus was, namely, the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord of Life, but Peter wanted to define on his own terms what that meant. But that is not how it works.

"My ways are not your ways," God told the Old Testament prophet Samuel. What was true then is still true today. Jesus pointed to a new Way of living, one that revealed timeless and eternal Truth, and opened true Life.

Peter did not want to climb that 257 steps to the top of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. Nor did he want to risk his life in the vessels that snatched shipwrecked men, women, and children from chaotic seas.

Convenience is easy. But discipleship is not. Convenient Christians make convenient churches. But who wants that?

To God be the glory.

Amen.

