



OUR CONSTITUTIVE FAITH:

**5. ONE CHURCH
REV. BRADLEY L. DEHAVEN
ST. ANDREW'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
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MATTHEW 16:13-19

This past week, George and I, along with about three hundred or so United Methodist Ministers from the Southwest Texas Conference attended the Bishop's Convocation at Mt. Wesley Encampment in Kerrville. It was a delightful retreat in which many pastors were given the opportunity to come together in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ for fellowship, faith, learning and inspiration. We worshiped together, ate together, sang together, shared together and grew together.

While we were there, we were inspired by Bishop Bill Oden from Dallas. Bishop Oden has since retired from active service in the Church, and now is the Bishop in Residence at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology. Bishop Oden shared with us his understanding of where we are in the United Methodist Church today, and the challenges that we all face as Christians in this day and age. In so doing, he shared a delightful story about a colleague of his, who had boarded a plane to the Midwest, and found himself seated next to another gentleman. The two sat there for quite some time before the other fellow spoke up and introduced himself. He then asked, "Tell me sir, are you a Christian?" "Yes, I am," came the reply. "So am I!" said the other man.

"What brand of Christian are you?"

"I'm a Baptist."

"So am I!" he said. "Are you an American Baptist or a Southern Baptist?"

"American Baptist."

"So am I! Are you from the East Coast or are you from the Great Lakes Region?"

"Great Lakes region."

"So am I! Are you from the Southern or the Northern convention of the Great Lakes region?"

"Southern Convention."

"So am I! Are you from the 1878 Convention or the 1912 Convention?"

"1912 Convention."

At that the other fellow sort of snarled his lip, turned away for a moment, then turned back to the first fellow and said, "DIE, You FAITHLESS HEATHEN!!!"

You know, there are so many things that seem to divide the Church today. Denominations, and trends; systems of beliefs and doctrines; dogmas and histories; the works. Literally there are so many things that have split the Church into so many factions. I read somewhere recently that there are no less than 36,000 different forms of Christianity in the world today. 36,000!!! Don't think for a moment that there aren't any splits in the United Methodist Church! We've got a slew of different caucuses! We have the Good News Movement, the Reconciling Movement, and some movements that don't seem to want to move at all! We've got factions that are pulling for a merger between the Rio Grande and the Southwest Texas Conferences of the United Methodist Church. We've got factions that are pulling us away from that. We've got folks believing that we should never have

infant baptisms, nor should we serve communion to non-members. We've got groups in the denomination that wanted to split apart from the church over the issues of gays and lesbians, and we've got groups that believe that the denomination is destined to fail because of its stances on these and many other issues.

In short, we've got a royal mess in the Church today. A lot of this has to do with what our priorities are in the Church. What is our motivation? What are our beliefs? What are the perceptions, the perspectives and the drives that have come from our past, our experiences, our understandings of the traditions of the Church, and so on...

While there seems to be a never-ending inventory of ways that we've become splintered, there is still one thing that keeps us together – a motley crew that we are. That one thing is the belief that the Church is of God and will be preserved until the end of time. In the Nicene Creed, we say it this way: “We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

For the past few weeks we've been looking at the nature of the system of beliefs that are constitutive of our faith – those things that we've had in common down through the ages with Christians worldwide. For the last two thousand years, there are a few things that we have discerned are “Musts” in the litany of shared beliefs among Christians. Namely we believe in God, Creator of all there is; of his Son Jesus Christ, both human and divine, who came to save us; and of one Holy Spirit who has taken Jesus' place among the believers, who has come to remind us of all Jesus has said. This morning we are looking at the gift of God that we have come to know of as the Church. That is, the body of believers. Those who have gathered together out of our common beliefs in the Trinity. From the history and heritage of the Church we find the sharing of the faith from generation to generation.

This morning's scripture reading from Matthew looks at an important conversation between Jesus and his disciples. At first glance, it appears that Jesus is interested in the popular opinion of the day. As political analysts would say, he is putting a poll out into the field. Jesus asks “what are people saying about Me?” The disciples come back with an assortment of answers, all of which seem to point to the fact that most people know that Jesus is something special, although they just aren't quite sure what.

Then Jesus asks another question – this time more directly. He turns to his disciples and asks them point blank: “Who do you say that I am?” It is Peter's response that elicits the remainder of Jesus' dialog, and begins to put us at the heart of where we are today. Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!”

Jesus blesses Peter, and we have this whole scene where Jesus first mentions the Church. It is here that Jesus discusses the divine plan to have a Church, and this is the first time it would be mentioned in a Gospel. Jesus' statement is somewhat startling to the disciples. What does he mean, the church will be built on Peter?

For the longest time, scholars have thought that the statement Peter made was what Jesus was referring to. It would be Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah that would be the basis for building the new Church. Statements of faith have always carried with them a bit of divine wisdom and revelation, and it would have appeared that this one was no different. But a more accurate reading reveals that it isn't what Peter said that Jesus wants to build his church on, rather, it is Peter himself! In other words, it isn't the statement of faith, but rather the person!

Like every incident in the scriptures, whenever people encounter God face to face and live to tell about it, the person is changed. One need not think back too far to remember the stories of Abram meeting God and becoming Abraham, Sarai laughing at God's proposal to become a mother at an old age and becoming Sarah, Jacob wrestling with God by the Jabbok River and becoming Israel. Even in the New Testament this was happening! Saul of Tarsus encounters Jesus on the road

to Damascus, and becomes not the persecutor of the Church but its strongest ally named Paul. This story is no different. Simple Simon, a fisherman, is asked a question about who he believes Jesus to be and encounters divine revelation and is forever changed to Peter. Today we would call him Rocky – not because he was unstable, unsure, but because he was solid like a rock.

It would be in that one moment when God reveals who God is – not in Peter, but in Jesus – that we find Jesus' blessing. When Peter says what he says, Jesus instantly recognizes that it wasn't Peter who came up with those words, but rather God was speaking through him, sharing with the world who Jesus really is.

But then we get to the meat of the passage. Jesus begins to define how he will build this new Church, what its foundation will be, and what will be the responsibilities of it.

It seems odd, but Jesus didn't set about to begin a new religion. In fact, this passage has been one of the most misunderstood passages in all Christianity. The reason is, we hear these words that we have been given the awesome power to define the boundaries of what will be held firm and what will be released. And suddenly, it is like we are on a power trip. Jesus says to Peter, "to you I have given the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven." That's like giving the keys to the antique Ferrari to your sixteen-year-old, and saying to him, "now Son, please drive responsibly." But what is really happening here?

In this passage, Jesus is again preparing to leave his disciples. He is giving them the tools they will need to continue the ministry after he has been resurrected. Jesus knows that they will need to finish what he has started. To give them the keys to the Kingdom is to say to them, "you have a responsibility to continue to live as I have lived; to continue to value what I have valued; to continue to love as I have loved." Jesus is basically sharing with his disciples that the business of the Kingdom is going to soon be in their hands – and by direct descent, into OUR HANDS.

To have been given this great power – to decide what is to be bound or loosed in earth and in heaven – is a fantastic responsibility. Literally it means that we have been given the authority to discern what the Church believes about itself, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; and what it will forgive and not forgive. It has the awesome power to determine the limits of what the Church is about. This responsibility is not one that is to be taken lightly. Rather, it the power that Jesus has been given – given to us.

The most significant thing is that this passage shares with us point blank that Jesus is preparing for his immanent departure, and needs to transfer power to these disciples. He doesn't want to do it haphazardly, but rather wants them to know that God's plan for everyone is simple – to live under the rule and authority of God. And it is a difficult thing for them to hear. Peter, as a matter of fact, in just a few short verses, will demonstrate that he doesn't quite get it, and will be severely rebuked by Jesus. In this same chapter, Jesus lauds Peter because he spoke the words that came through him from God, and then rebukes Peter for speaking the words that Satan had put into his mouth! That's how badly they understand it. But Jesus wants them to understand that only when we are united under the rule of God will we fully benefit from life in the Kingdom.

Perhaps the best way to understand it might be to share with you an old story. Jesus had just returned to Heaven after the Resurrection, and was met by Gabriel, who wanted to know "how it went." Jesus shared with him that he had done it. All he had to do had been completed. He had taught them everything he could, and he had given them the Holy Spirit as it was promised. Gabriel wanted to know who he left his power with, and Jesus replied that he had given it all to them.

"What if that doesn't work? What if they use it wrong?"

"Then it is over," Jesus answered.

"You don't have a backup plan?" Gabriel asked.

"No."

To understand the depths of what Jesus has entrusted to us, we must begin to put aside our differences, and begin to find our common ground. We must begin to see that denominationalism and separation will not bring about the Kingdom. In fact, the early church understood this perhaps better than we do. They would write in the Nicene Creed in the early fourth century, these immortal words: “We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Their concerns were not that there would be one ROMAN Catholic Church, but rather that there would be one body of believers, one community of faith, that would stretch worldwide. It would be imperative that we all come together to understand that divided we will fall. United, we can change the world – and usher in the Kingdom of God. Being one church means just that – one body of Christ, knowing and believing together.

It is interesting to me that there are two distinct ways to unite any group of people – you either unite them against a common enemy, or you unite them toward a common goal. I believe it is easier for us to choose the former than it is the latter. Maybe, if we would begin to see more clearly what it is that unites us, rather than focusing on what it is that divides us, the Church might actually begin to understand better its role in changing the world. After all, this is our Constitutive Faith. It is what we believe together as Christians. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.