

The Builder
Matthew 16:13-20
September 25, 2005

Today's sermon title comes from novelist, poet and professor Reynolds Price, who has a lifelong love affair with Jesus but not much time for church. In a book about the morality of Jesus--which Price believes the church notoriously ignores--he suggests that "Jesus seems to have spent his youth working with his brothers in Joseph's construction business. The Greek word so famously translated 'carpenter' can mean, more broadly, a builder."¹

This morning we meet Jesus and the disciples at a turning point in his ministry. Peter has identified Jesus as the revelation of God. As Jesus moves toward his death, he takes steps to prepare his disciples to continue his ministry. He reveals his intention to build a new community of those who perceive his identity as the Son of the Living God.

When Jesus refers to the church he will build, he is not talking about an institution, a bureaucracy, nor a building. Jesus is talking about a community. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, refers to an assembly. Jesus' church is a gathering of people, people who need one another, people who need to find God at the core of their lives.

Jesus is the builder and continues to be the builder of the true church. Christ's presence continues to be active in the lives of communities which allow Christ to be the builder, the shaper and guide of their life together. We humans have a bent to control, so it is often difficult for us to step back, relinquish our own desires and interests, and listen to Christ's design for the church in this century and context. It's easy for us to project our own ideas onto Jesus and convince ourselves that our thoughts are his thoughts.

The church that is built by Christ studies the teachings of Jesus to apply them to current settings. The Lord-built house listens deeply and consistently for the leadings of the Spirit of God. The community that claims the name of Christ is composed of persons who allow Jesus to be the primary shaping influence in their lives. Jesus is the contractor; we are the laborers and material he needs to create a community that continues his presence today. That's what the church is. Now what is the church for?

Elaine Pagels is a distinguished professor at Princeton University. She is not a seminary professor. She is a humanities scholar who studies and knows a great deal about the human phenomenon of religion. Her specialty is early Christianity, and she is widely respected for her scholarly

research and books. She is not particularly a church person. In fact, she had pretty much given up on the church as an institution worthy of her time and attention, not unlike a lot of thoughtful people. But she begins her book, *Beyond Belief*, with an unusual--for her-- anecdote and a very powerful witness.

On a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York, she interrupted her daily run by stopping in the entrance of an Episcopal church to get warm. Two days earlier, her two-and-a-half-year-old son had been diagnosed with an invariably fatal lung disease. I cannot even begin to imagine how devastating that experience must be.

She writes: "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. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. . . .

"The day after we heard Mark's diagnosis--and that he had a few months to live, maybe a few years--a team of doctors urged us to authorize a lung biopsy, a painful and invasive procedure. How could 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. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine."²

In the midst of personal crisis, Elaine Pagels knew that she could not walk the journey alone. She needed companions who would share her pain, weep and grieve with her, pray with and for her family, and remind her of the larger story of which she was a part. As she wrote, she needed "a family who knows how to face death."

That's exactly the kind of community Jesus intends to build when he says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Peter is a human being with his strengths and his weaknesses. He is frequently the disciple with profound understanding, and yet he has his moments of doubt, fear, and

misunderstanding that make him look like a bumbling fool. And yet, Jesus invites Peter to be a part of his inner circle of students, chosen to carry on his message and ministry.

Jesus is intentional about calling together twelve men to mentor in their relationships to God. Jesus knows that we can't follow him alone. We can't be Christians alone. We need a community of pilgrims traveling the same journey of faith. We need friends to help us discern the pathways God is calling us to take. We need companions whom we can trust with the crises of life and the challenges that keep us awake at night. We need persons of faith who can pray with us and care for us. We need partners with whom we can discuss the issues of life and seek God's presence in the midst of it all. We need people who can sing, pray, and believe when our spirits are too scorched to care. We need a community that is an oasis when life feels barren of meaning and a lighthouse of hope when the world is darkened by gloom.

Life lived in community with other human beings is healthier. Robert Putnam is the Harvard professor who wrote a book called, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In an interview, he talks about the importance of social capital. "Social networks have amazing powers. People who are more connected with other people live longer and are healthier. In communities where people are connected, the schools work better, the crime rate is lower, the economic growth rate is higher."³

Jesus must have known of the power of social networks. God obviously created us as social beings. We are made for relationship with God and with one another. That's the purpose of the church Jesus builds. He gathers the people together so that they can experience the love of God in community and go forth to express it in their lives and living. That's the mission statement we are considering for our congregation: Experiencing and Expressing God's Love.

We are called to be a community of care and compassion for people like Elaine Pagels who are stunned by a diagnosis and need a glimmer of hope. We are called to be a training ground for students of all ages who are seeking to find the meaning of life, who long to quench the deep thirsting of their souls with Living Water. The gathered people of God are called to be a compass, offering direction to those who realize that life is more than Me, that life is enriched when it includes one another. We are an oasis where people can experience the love of God.

Author Anne Lamott, who returned to the church a few years ago after a long absence and a very difficult life, wrote in *Salon* that she insists her fourteen-year-old go to church even if he hates it. Her revelation

stimulated a lot of response, much of it negative. People accused her of oppressing her child, abusing him even by making him go to church on Sunday. Her response was delightful. "Left to their own," she said, "teenagers would opt out of many important things like flossing their teeth and homework. It's good to do uncomfortable things. It's weight training for life." And then she went deeper: "Teens who don't go to church miss opportunities to see people loving God back. Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alone."⁴

Learning to love God back. The people gather not only to experience God's love and be filled with warm fuzzies. We gather to express God's love to one another, to love God back. The church that Jesus builds is to be a reflection of his very life and ministry. It's a people seeking to radically care for others, as Jesus has for them.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu suggests that the church should be an audiovisual of God's reconciling and unifying purpose in Christ: "God saw our brokenness and sought to extricate us from it—to bring us back to our intended condition of relatedness...God sent Jesus who would fling out his arms on the cross as if to embrace us."⁵

The church is called to fling out its arms in a wide embrace as an expression of the love of God, so that others might experience that love for themselves. That's the kind of church Jesus intends to build.

I trust that the fact that this church has been in ministry for 150 years is testimony to the fact that it has been faithful to this mission. As we embark upon the coming years of mission, may we continue to allow Jesus to be the builder of this church and lend ourselves as labors so that all might experience and express the love of God.

¹ Reynolds Price, *A Serious Way of Wandering* (Scribner, 2003), p. 13.

² Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 3-4.

³ David J. Wood, "Let's Meet: An Interview with Robert Putnam," *The Christian Century*, February 10, 2004, p. 24.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2003.

⁵ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *Christian Century*, March 9, 2004, p. 3.

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