



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

University Christian Church – Austin

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Building Christ's Church

Matt. 16:13-20

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Some of you know the name Elaine Pagels. She is a professor at Princeton University who is known by many contemporary religious readers, not because she writes devotional materials that speak to the Christian heart, but because she is known as a humanities scholar who dashes mythologies into pieces. She can be very hard on those who embrace an orthodox Christian view. She, herself, is well versed in the character and movement of religious groups, but not as one who participates. Elaine Pagels had all but given up on the church as an institution worthy of her time, and in that she is like many of our age. So it was noteworthy when Pagels began a recent book entitled *Beyond Belief* with her own story of the church.

As she was out for her morning run on one cold Sunday in New York City, Elaine Pagels stopped at the entrance of an Episcopal church just to warm her chilly bones. But it wasn't just any day. You see, 2 days earlier, her 21/2 yr. Old son, Mark, had been diagnosed with a lung disease that is always fatal. 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.” (pp. 3 - 4)

This warm morning in Austin, I would like to call you, as well, to a deeper consideration of the church, for our scripture reading this morning deals with the importance of the church.

Remember the setting. Jesus and his disciples are walking together near the Roman city named Caesarea Philippi. Suddenly it is time for the dreaded pop quiz. Jesus asks of his disciples, :“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

And thank God the disciples included among them the impetuous one, Peter who frequently spoke before he thought. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

17 And 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.

18 And 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.

Oh, there are various understandings of this passage, of course. The Roman Catholic Church used the phrase here as the basis upon which the primacy of Rome is established. We Protestants have understood this, instead, to mean that it is the faith that Peter expresses that will be the ultimate base upon which the church is built.ⁱ

Leaving behind those concerns for now, think with me about the very basic notion of whether or not Jesus really intended to build a church. If he did mean what he said, what was the church that he envisioned? How do we measure up?

We are used to the life of Jesus being told in episodic fashion. We know of the events leading up to his birth. We know the story of him as a youngster in the Temple. And then we hear of Jesus beginning his ministry at approximately 30 years of age. Have you ever wondered what it was that he was doing all those years?

We have a powerful hint in the patterns of life of those days. Sons followed in the footsteps of fathers, picking up the family occupation with great regularity. And we know that Jesus' father, Joseph, was in Greek a *tekton*.ⁱⁱ We have often heard this translated as carpenter, but that is an overly specified understanding of the word *tekton*. *Tekton* means more broadly a skilled worker of some sort, which in those days would have meant a person who built things.

What would Joseph have built? He could have built tables and chairs and home implements for people who in the village Nazareth as we might have traditionally thought; or, and I find this option an enchanting one, Joseph and his son Jesus and- as we find hints of else where in the gospels- probably other brothers of Jesus, may have worked in the nearby Roman city of Sepphoris only 4 miles away, building; building significant structures that would declare the mighty power of Rome; structures that would withstand the fierce winds of that area there on the hilltop; and would live for generations, for centuries, casting their spirit upon following generations. ⁱⁱⁱ

So, we may take from this possibility that when Jesus said to Peter that on Peter would be built Jesus church, that he spoke out of a knowledge of building, of permanence, something for the future.

Still, I wonder. Would Jesus have been please to see much of the church that Peter built? Think back over the last 2000 years and instead of jumping to those places where the church has failed by inadequately following her Lord, imagine with me all the whose edifices all, those ministries, all those outstretched and loving hands that have proceeded from the church.

**Think of all of the schools that have taught literacy;
the universities that have brought higher knowledge, that were founded by those faithful to Jesus and in his name.**

Remember with me of all of the monasteries housing those devoted to God;

the missionaries on the road to every land who heard the gospel message in a church somewhere,

the marchers for civil rights and equal rights, and the clarion calls For JUSTICE emanating from one of thousands and thousands of congregations down through the ages, congregations where – as Esthermay Johnston reminded our Elders last Sunday morning- congregations where seeds of faith were planted, later bearing fruit in changed lives.

My conviction is that Jesus did intend to leave behind a group of people who would carry on his message; who would proclaim his faith and hope in the goodness of God and God's eventual victory. Do you remember the phrase, “and the gates of hell will not prevail against it?” There is an abiding confidence in the message Jesus brought that those who walk in his path will never know the final loss that those without faith fear.

It seems clear that Jesus foresaw his own death, and that it took no genius to anticipate that it would be by crucifixion. It is also just as clear, however, that Jesus, did not see this as a final defeat. Jesus trusted that God would use even his own physical death to bring about something better.

Yes, deep down, I believe that Jesus meant to build a church, to remind people of his message of the Kingdom of God. It is the church, in the apostle Paul's words, that carries forth Jesus' vision and spirit even if it is in very earthen vessels

And part of the reason why we don't often celebrate the good that the church does, is that it is so commonplace....so ordinary. When you stop to think of how regularly quiet people such as many here – without fanfare simply engage in all sorts of important, organized outreach ministries -- for example to the homeless of this area -- but who do so in such a quiet way that the world does not take notice.

60 years ago some farsighted individuals determined that a church was needed here on the corner of 21st St. and University Avenue, at the doorstep of the University of Texas, a church that would take seriously a mission to the University: to care for students, faculty, staff in tangible ways; to nurture those who desire to grow a Christian spirit within them. Those bold visionaries of the 1940s, some of whom are among us still, knew that in their building of a church that is solid and that expresses faith in shape and its decor, in the windows which tell the stories of faith, they were building a church that would long outlive them personally.

Tomorrow afternoon I will be going with one of the pastors who served this church in the 1970's, Bill Howland, to sort through

his ministerial library in his retirement . Many of the books he has collected over decades of service in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have are ready been donated to Phillips Theological Seminary where they will enlighten students there. But tomorrow he and I will sort through more of those books, books that he is passing on in the hopes that they will encourage and develop another generation of church leaders. Some of the books will go to our Church Library where you may read them and be inspired. Others will go to Roslyn Hogan as she establishes her theological library in the beginning years of her ministry. Some will go to Jack Knox who grew up in this congregation and will be ordained in this building early next year. Some will be packed up and shipped to Hobbes, New Mexico, where our sister in Christ and former seminary intern, Carol Cabbiness, is serving her first church. Seeds that decades ago, some Christian souls passed along to young Bill Howland in his home church, have flowered fully and richly, and now find a new birth in each of these new pastors. For as Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime, therefore we must be saved by hope,” Hope and trust in those who will follow after us.

Yes I do believe that Jesus meant to leave behind him a church: a place where journeyers in faith who would gather to support one another, to nurture one another, to raise their children

in faith, to band together to reach out to the community, to gather in worship and receive each week the offer of communion with the living God. Churches are to be an exemplar family, a place where visitors and the wider community can look and see, “look at those Christians how they love one another,” and wonder what living spirit infuses them so. Or as Elaine Pagels noted, “here is a family that knows how to face death.”

Churches – fallible, all too human churches – are the places where the seeds of the Gospel of Jesus Christ are planted, where they are nurtured, where the flower and seed the next generation of the faithful. Loving Christian people don't just happen. They are grown in networks of intentional love.

I believe that one of the chief reasons that you and I are here on this earth and more particularly in this sanctuary, is that we are to be the ones BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH. We are the ones who are to pass the love of God we have found in Jesus to another generation of people who will come through these doors and sit in these pews and sing the hymns of faith and grow in the knowledge and the experience of the love of God.

ⁱ Much of the structure and thrust this, including a number of the special references, are reliant on a sermon The Builder delivered by J. Buchanan at 4th Presby. Ch., Chicago, on September 28, 2003

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/sepphoris.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ There was a Roman amphitheater in Sepphoris which would have been at an extension of Roman culture and provided for all of the people of that area who could participate insight into some of the richest thinking humankind had known to that point.