

"In the Footsteps of the Lord, Part 5: The Founder":  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for March 8<sup>th</sup> 2020 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 16: 13-20

Let's start with Mark's Gospel: generally regarded as the oldest of the four. Let's begin with Mark's version of this episode, presumably the original. As found in Mark, the episode begins almost identically.

*And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.<sup>i</sup>* Now: while it is not quite accurate to claim that Mark's version ends with those orders to keep silent, it **is** accurate to recall that Mark, then and there, shifts gears and offers a conversation about the sort of Christ, the sort of Messiah, Jesus will turn out to be: the suggestion strongly offered that he will be a suffering Christ, a suffering Messiah, an insight offered, also, in Matthew's version. But in Matthew—before any of that transpires—something happens that has no parallel in Mark nor, for that matter, in Luke. Mind you: things get underway in Matthew much as they do in Mark.

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Pretty much identical to Mark although one noteworthy difference is that here, in Matthew, Peter not only proclaims Jesus as Messiah but also as "Son of the living God". That's of interest, but then—immediately following that acclamation from Peter—comes the real kicker we find only in Matthew, namely: Christ's response!*

*"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock<sup>[a]</sup> I will build my church, and the gates of hell<sup>[a]</sup> shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed<sup>[a]</sup> in heaven."<sup>20</sup>* With that addition to Mark's account, we are into a whole different way of thinking about this remarkable encounter between Jesus and his closest friends

And it is, I think, fair to suggest that the mainstream scholarly consensus is that Matthew's Gospel—to a far greater extent than Mark's Gospel—shows an interest in the institution of the Church which is why Matthew adds these words about Simon "becoming" Peter: the rock on which the church will be founded. That having been said:

the fact that Mark never makes use of the word “church” in his Gospel, doesn’t really stand in such sharp contrast with Matthew’s Gospel given that Matthew’s Gospel—while it does use the word “church”—only uses it twice. For that reason, there is this little voice in my head that wonders, given that Peter is traditionally thought to have been the source behind Mark’s Gospel, whether Peter might have been too modest to include any of this in the eyewitness account he provided to Mark, whereas Matthew—in his reworking of Mark—chose to incorporate Christ’s effusive praise of Peter. Whatever the explanation, this much is clear.

At a critical juncture in Matthew’s Gospel—closely linked to Simon’s identification of Jesus as the Christ—comes a further identification, linking the founding of the Church to Peter’s confession. All of which magically put me in mind of a brief conversation about which I had almost entirely forgotten.

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I was still a student at the time so this was quite some time ago. I was in a restaurant: as I recall it, sitting at the luncheon counter, having a bite to eat. I was likely in my early 30s, and the person sitting next to me at the luncheon counter—also a man in his late 20s or 30s—noticed the book I was reading...

...please don’t ask me to recall which book I was reading because I have no idea although it must have been a book with a theological hook to it....

...my luncheon-counter companion noticed the book and asked me about myself and why I was reading what I was reading, no doubt eliciting from me the response that I was preparing to be a minister in the church. The long and the short of it is that he quickly revealed himself as a member of the tribe we now describe as that of those who are “spiritual but not religious”. Noting that he found the figure of Jesus fascinating, he also expressed certainty that Jesus never had any intention of starting a church. Nor was that off-hand comment substantially different in tone from a well-known quote offered by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French Catholic theologian Alfred Loisy, who ruefully remarked: “Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church”, which is the sort of quip that might even get you excommunicated which, in fact, is precisely what happened to Loisy in 1908.<sup>ii</sup> But I digress! My point is this!

As we have ourselves discovered, these past few weeks as we have walked in the footsteps of the Lord: it has seemed entirely right and fitting for us to regard him as a Prophet....to have acclaimed him as a Herald, specifically Herald of the Kingdom of Heaven...and furthermore—as an extension of his prophetic witness to the Kingdom—to have duly noted his work as a healer and as a teacher. Notice, however, notice that what these four designations...

...prophet, herald, healer, teacher...

...what all four have in common is that they function quite nicely outside of any institutional props. That is why my lunch-counter friend—no less than a somewhat dissident churchman such as Alfred Loisy—may balk at the thought that Jesus was the founder of a church: why they and many others prefer to blame the Apostle Paul (a convenient villain in countless ways) for the founding of the Church, so that they can imagine a Jesus whose hands are kept clean from all of that is less than ideal in the life of all of our churches. To which I can only respond by insisting that Jesus clearly wanted to start something. As a matter of fact, one of the few things all four Gospels have in common is that they depict Jesus, virtually from the outset of his public ministry, calling disciples...in effect building a team to travel with him and participate in his ministry. If you are uncomfortable calling that a church, fair enough. But don't pretend he wasn't seeking to start something! Even if you are more comfortable calling it a "happening" or a "movement", don't pretend that it was incidental to the work he was doing. And yes: once he started that "something"—and assuming that God was going to bless that "something"—it was only a matter of time before it was going to grow into something impressive. And yes: whether or not you are a fan, the worldwide, multi-denominational, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural something we call the church, truly is an impressive something!

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Let's return...let's return to the story of Simon Peter's confession, his confession of Jesus as the Christ. As many of you—perhaps most of you—will be aware, the version found in Matthew's Gospel has been the source of no shortage of controversy within Christian circles. Pretty much from the outset, the Catholic Church—the **Roman** Catholic Church—has taken the pledge Jesus offers to Simon Peter...

*...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...*

...from the outset the Catholic Church has regarded this as a promise which concerns not only Simon Peter—who died in Rome and came to be regarded as the first Bishop of the city of Rome—but a promise thereby made to all those who would succeed Peter as Rome's Bishop, the ones who we know as the Pope. Both the Eastern Orthodox and, of course, Protestants have strongly dissented from that perspective although in different ways. Sometimes that dissent has been willing to concede that Jesus does, in fact, single out Peter for leadership in the early church: leadership clearly manifested over the first half of the book of ancient Church history, the New Testament's fifth book, the book Acts. What Eastern Orthodox are unwilling to offer, however, is agreement that Peter's mantle of leadership gives the Bishop of Rome supreme authority over the life of the Church. In the case of Protestants, of course, we challenge the whole notion that authority is inherited in that sort of way, just because someone is elected Bishop of Rome. In short: even those non-Catholics who recognize the special authority of Peter himself, withhold any such authority from those who subsequently came to be referred to as Pope. Sadly, there is very little sign that agreement on that issue is any closer to resolution now than it was 1000 years ago, when the Orthodox and the Catholics split, and certainly no less close

to resolution now than it was 500 years ago when Protestants and Catholics split. Nevertheless!

What Protestants and Orthodox do agree on...and what Catholics are happy to concede...is that it is no mere coincidence that Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ provides the occasion, the motive, the impetus for Jesus to turn to Peter and to offer his effusive praise for his insight. Not even the staunchest Catholic apologist can deny the connection between Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ...and Jesus' subsequent confession of Peter. Whatever one thinks of Peter's specific role in the life of the early church...indeed, whatever one thinks of the appropriate role that ought to be played in the life of the contemporary church by the present occupant of Peter's seat in the city of Rome...what cannot be denied is the momentousness of the insight the original Peter offered when he courageously stepped forward as the first...

...this is a signal honour...one that can never be taken from him...

...the honour of Simon the fisherman having been the first to have stepped forward, in response to Jesus' question ("Who do you say that I am"), to affirm that Jesus is the Messiah...that Jesus is the Christ. That is at the very heart of the Gospel: something of which we dare not lose sight.

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Think of it like this.

The Church...the Church of Jesus Christ...does many things. Not every congregation is able to do all of them...some struggle, because of their small size...to do more than one or two of them. But the Church of Jesus Christ does many things.

Following in the footsteps of its Lord, the Church feeds the hungry, seeks to bring healing to the broken, seeks to call to justice those misusing their power and authority and, of course, seeks to offer regular worship. Each and every one of those ministries are crucial to our identity; each and every one of them helps to lend credibility to our witness as Jesus' followers. But each of them must always be regarded as activities which accompany our central mandate, the mandate of a church, a movement, if you prefer a "happening" that takes its core identity from the "Rock": Peter's bold declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ. All of the many good works into which the church enters are short-circuited when they become a substitute for that central mandate: when they become a way of evading, avoiding, skirting around that which is both our greatest privilege and our most profound challenge. No matter how rich our healing ministry, no matter how vibrant our worship, no matter how acute our commitment to justice, no matter how intent our ministry to the poor and the marginalized, all of it misses the boat if it is not done as a manifestation of our witness to Jesus: our witness to Jesus as the Christ, Son of the living God. Pointing to Jesus as Simon Peter pointed to Jesus: reminding a shadowed world that he is its true light, reminding a despairing world that he is its authentic hope, bringing comfort to a hungry

world with the reminder that he is its true nourishment. Doing so not arrogantly, not with a chip on our shoulder and a swagger in our step—God forbid!--...but as those...

...well, as those who—in the immortal words of D.T. Niles<sup>iii</sup>—know themselves to be beggars...beggars who have found bread...and are happy to tell other beggars where they too can find bread. We can do many other things as a church....many of them not only bold and beautiful, but gracious and godly, but unless we do that one thing—unless we are prepared to make Simon Peter’s confession our own—in a very real sense, we are no longer the church.

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Permit a final thought.

At the very end of the episode—the episode, that is, as Matthew tells it—Jesus make an even more outrageous set of promises to Simon. Having told him that he is “Peter”, the rock on whom he will build his Church, Jesus goes on to say of the Church, and Peter’s role in it: *the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*” That’s an amazing set of promises...but I must tell you.

I don’t think the Church has always taken those promises to heart: not with the sense of awe, the sense of fear and trembling, **the sense of urgency** with which that promise ought to have been heard. However one understands the authority thereby offered—whether it’s offered to Peter himself, to the Popes that succeeded him, or to the Christian faith community as a whole—the power thereby offered...

...the power to bind and loosen not only here on earth but in heaven...

...surely that power represents a profound gift and a truly awesome responsibility: a responsibility which I don’t think we have generally wielded with as much confidence as might have been desirable. The very fact that the Christian Church—for the majority of its history—seems to have resigned itself to the likelihood that the vast majority of human beings are destined to spend eternity in hell...

...a conviction to which Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox alike seem to have become (at best) resigned or (at worst) enthusiastic proponents...

...suggests to me that we don’t really comprehend what Christ was here saying to Simon Peter....or if we do comprehend it, that we don’t really trust that it could possibly be true since it sounds too good to be true. That it could possibly be true that the power of the keys has been given to the Church, really and truly...and that we, through our words and our deeds, above all through our prayers, have been given the power to bind and to set free. That whatever the church binds on earth will be bound in heaven....that whatever the church sets free on earth will be set free in heaven. And

surely...surely whatever else that means....does it not suggest that we should always lead with mercy? That we ought never to resign ourselves to the infernos we fashion for ourselves and for others, never resign ourselves to the horrific possibility that the gates of hell might stand for all eternity? And does it not also suggest that mercy and compassion and yes—boundless hope, wild-eyed radical trust in God—ought to be our bywords? And yes....does it not also in the end suggest that all of it...the whole overflowing mercy laden, compassion over-flowing gift of the Gospel ought to be held by us and offered to the world through us: not anxiously or despairingly, but with an enthusiasm and a generosity grounded not in our own name, not in the name of the Church, but in the name of the One to whom the Church bears witness? Jesus the Christ. Jesus our founder!

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May it be so! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 8: 27-30

<sup>ii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Loisy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Loisy)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6477664.D\\_T\\_Niles](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6477664.D_T_Niles)