

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 16, Series A (Pentecost 12)
Saturday, August 22nd, 2020
Sunday, August 23rd, 2020

Sermon: The Church Is Good

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Focus: Jesus promises that he will build his Church.

Function: That they would not be afraid of the Church's future.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. "How is your church doing?" That's the question that lots of people ask me these days—parishioners, fellow pastors, family, and friends. "How's your church?" That's the burning question of many church leaders and Christians during the coronavirus pandemic. Ever since most congregations shut their doors at the end of March, we have worried and fretted about what the church would look like during the threat of covid-19. Would people stay connected and continue to hear the Word even if they stayed home and could only watch the worship services online? How would they receive the Lord's Supper? Would they keep giving their tithes and offerings to the church? Would our congregation be able to pay its bills? And what about after reopening: would people *come back*? Would the long "break" from church make people realize how desperately they need Jesus and each other, or would it put the nail in the coffin on their church attendance? And would the church remain joyful and united, or would it schism over the same politicized debates about masks and social distancing that seem to divide Americans these days?

And now, five months after the Covid shutdown and three months after we reopened, I ask again: "How is your church doing?" How is *our* church doing?

So here's a snapshot for you. Even though our giving is slightly down year-to-date, so are our expenses, and by God's grace we've stayed in the black for the entire year so far. We give thanks to God for the generosity of his people even with the economic uncertainty and job losses experienced by some within our congregation. Truly, the Lord has been good to us.

Attendance this summer has been lackluster—as we suspected it would be. For example, since May 31st, we've averaged 117 people in worship each weekend. Compared to the same period in 2019, that's only about 66% of last year's summer attendance.

But at least we're open! Even with all the restrictions and requirements for public places, we are still able to gather in fellowship around God's Word and Sacraments. Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt. 18:20). So all you really need for a church is two or three Christians. And, thanks be to God, we've had many more than that.

Many churches in our state and country haven't even reopened yet (only 65% overall). (One local megachurch pastor told me that "it's just not worth it" to offer additional service times just to fit everyone in.) Of those congregations that have reopened for in-person worship, most report average weekly attendance of only 10-40% of their *pre*-pandemic attendance—a huge loss.¹ Quite notably, the smaller the congregation, the greater the return rate of its church members.² Yet even there, just over half of smaller congregations (less than 250 AWA) are offering some kind of children's ministry. That doesn't seem to bode well for the American

¹ https://careynieuwhof.com/church-attendance-is-dying-whats-next/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=SocialSnap&fbclid=IwAR18Nwx4JB YDXtmzCNv4T1_yWbO3-0Kd71K_q2IMGbx-Ou42woFeZG777k8

² Survey of Colorado churches by Pastor Dave Runyon (cityunite.org), results shared by e-mail on August 7th, 2020.

Church and the kingdom of God. Aren't you glad we offered in-person VBS and Sunday school this summer?

Remember how even *before* the pandemic, we were all used to hearing doomsday predictions about the decline of the Church in North America. And then there is the rise of the so-called “nones”—people with absolutely no religious affiliation whatsoever, who make up between a fifth to a quarter of our population, depending on generation.³ Various studies and surveys report that anywhere between 50 to 100 churches close their doors each week in this country—nearly four times as many church plants that begin.

So how is the church doing?

According to Jesus Christ, the Church is doing very well. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus declares: “How blessed you are, Simon Son of John, because no human being revealed this truth to you, but rather my Father in heaven gave you faith to believe. And so I assure you, that now you will be called Peter (which means a Rock), and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of hell will crumble before my Church” (Matt. 16:17-18, paraphrase).

Jesus promises to build *his* Church. Let that sink in for a moment. Jesus' packs a lot of punch into these verses. But it all boils down to this: Jesus will build his Church. This promise is reassuring and enlightening at the same time.

Here's the enlightening part: the Church belongs to *Jesus*. There's no such thing as “your church,” “my church,” or “the pastor's church.” Epiphany Lutheran Church of Castle Rock is not even *our* church. The whole Christian Church on earth, the “one holy catholic and apostolic church,” in every time and place is simply and solely *Jesus'* Church. Christ died for the Church. He gave his dying breath for the Church. He paid the bride price with his blood to buy back the

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/unaffiliated-religious-nones/>

Church from sin and death so that she could be his bride and belong to him forever. So the Church in all its iterations and denominations belongs to Christ. Not you. Not me. Just Jesus.

Whew! Praise God!

And here's the reassuring part: Jesus *will* build his Church. He's not merely considering it. He's not just thinking about it. He's actually *doing* it. Jesus is building his Church—not a building, but a people—the people of God, the Body of Christ. No matter how many Christians die from persecution, no matter how many churches close each week, no matter how many heresies harry the unity of the Body of Christ, Jesus promises to build *his* Church.

Consider that in our current context. The coronavirus pandemic is not a surprise to Jesus. He was not caught off guard by this global turmoil. He is not daunted or thwarted by it. And throughout the past 2,000 years, the church has faced many and worse pandemics and disasters than covid-19, including the Roman persecutions, the scourge of Islam, the Black Death that killed nearly a third of people in medieval Europe, the religious wars of the 1600's, two world wars, and the 1918 Flu Pandemic. Christ's Church has weathered one crisis after another and the Gospel still goes forth! So if Jesus and our forebears in the faith remained full of courage and hope, then why aren't we?

Jesus will build his Church. He can do it with us or without us, but I'd really like him to do it *with us*. My dream is for Epiphany Lutheran Church of Castle Rock, Colorado, to be part of the mission of Jesus Christ to seek lost sinners and bring them to faith. I believe God wants us to be a Gospel dynamo, leading the charge, shining the light of Christ to everyone around us. The Gospel is *not* ho hum, hum drum. The Gospel is *life*—new life, abundant life, *eternal* life. And in a world currently obsessed with the fear of death, what people need is *life* in Christ.

We cannot merely publish our service times, open our doors, and just wait for people to show up. That will not do. The Field of Dreams church growth mentality of the 1990's is bankrupt: "If you build it, they will come." Nearly an entire generation is lost because if you build it, they probably *won't* come. Even if 10,000 people were to drive by your church's plot of real estate in a given week doesn't mean that you're reaching 10,000 people with the Gospel. We cannot wait for the lonely, lost, and distressed to come to us. *We must go to them!*

God did not wait for us to get our act together and come to him. No, God took initiative and made the first move. "For God so loved the world that *he* gave his only Son..." (John 3:16a). "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, *Christ* died for us" (Rom. 5:8). "But when the fullness of time had come, *God* sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons [and daughters]" (Gal. 4:4-5). God gave, Christ died, God *sent!* Jesus came down and died to save us from our sins long before we ever stopped to reflect upon our sin or need for him. He *acted*, he didn't wait to save us.

Jesus is going to build his Church with you or without you. But wouldn't you rather be a part of it? Don't you want to announce the Good News of the coming kingdom? After all that Christ has done for you, don't you want to say, along with Simon Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God—or at least something like that in your own words? I know that I sure do. Let's do it together. Don't be afraid. Not even the gates of hell can stand against us (Matt. 16:18). "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). No one! Not when Jesus is with us every step of the way (cf. Matt. 28:20). The Church is doing great! So let's bring others along with us. Let's invite them into the kingdom. And let's stand in awe and wonder as Jesus builds his Church. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.