



from the desk of . . .
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Throw-Back Sunday

I LOVE THE CHURCH

Matthew 16:13-18

Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

"Some say John the Baptist," they answered. "Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet."

"What about you?" he asked them. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it.

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

Harry Winston built a reputation as a diamond merchant. He's the guy who owned the Hope Diamond for a # of years before donating it to the Smithsonian Museum. During his lifetime he made millions of \$'s because he was so good at convincing people that they needed to be wearing diamonds.

He was once asked what made him so successful/what caused him to be the "premier" diamond seller in the world? After all, there were other salespeople who were more knowledgeable, but nowhere near as successful. What made him so special? ...

Here was Harry Winston's response ... "Those other salespeople may know a lot about diamonds ... but I love them!" Listen to that again.

(They may know more about diamonds, but I love them.)

When I read that comment years ago, I wrote it down because it really impressed me ...

& I've pondered it off & on ever since.

And I want to use that thought as a springboard to this morning's "Throw-Back Sunday" message, as we think seriously about the "Church".

So, allow me to paraphrase Winston's words, right here at the beginning ... "other people may know a lot about the Church, but I love it!"

I've always loved the Church.

But I remember the day that I fully grasped that love. I was in graduate school, sitting in a Church History course being taught by Dr. Richard Lovelace.

Suddenly it dawned on me ... down through the centuries there have been lots of faithful people who have given their lives because ... they loved the Church. They believed the Scriptures where Paul instructs us to, "keep watch over ... the church of God, which the Lord made his own through the blood of his Son." (The Acts 20:28)

They totally understood the concept that I came to realize that day in my Seminary course ... that the Church is a precious thing to God ... so precious that He sent His Son to die for it. (Ephesians 5:25)

And I decided right then & there that I would love the Church in my life. And the privilege for me to be a Pastor in the Church is more than you can ever imagine.

Now, that doesn't mean that I haven't had a lover's quarrel with the Church, or at least part of the Church, from time to time. There have been moments when I've become disheartened about something the Church, (again I'm talking about part of it), said or did, so much so that I was almost embarrassed to be associated with it.

There've been times when I've looked around & thought ... "the Church is just full of hypocrites." Then I remembered the words of someone smarter than I ...

"You're so right, Rande, but come along,
there's room for one more!"

Sometimes the Church doesn't seem to live up to its' claims & it looks foolish in the sight of the people out there in the world. Yet, in spite of all that ...
the Church endures.

Sometimes it shrinks & withers; other times it blossoms & grows. We never know where God's going to take His Church. And that's something we must never forget ... it's His Church.

I still have a visual picture in my mind that comes out of my 1st pastorate in Niagara Falls.

I was standing in the front of the sanctuary, & we were all singing a hymn. And as I looked out there was an 89-year-old great-grandfather standing next to his 8-year-old great-granddaughter ...
& together they were worshipping God!

The Church is a marvelous collection of people.

63 years ago, this month, 263 residents of the new community of Rolling Meadows gathered in The Barn, just down the street, & signed this charter, committing themselves to become the 1st Christian congregation in Rolling Meadows.

Those men & women vowed:

"We do now, in the presence of God solemnly covenant with one another to accept the bonds of Fellowship as we become a Church of Christ, ever seeking the Truth which sets men free, the Power which makes men whole, & the Fellowship which unites all mankind."

I really appreciate that one phrase, "to accept the bonds of Fellowship as we become a Church of Christ." Upon that statement those 263 men & women built this congregation ... C.C.R.M.

(Almost all these charter members are now gone. Only Nadine Cranmer & Lorraine Schroeder are left.)

But in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus also talks about "building" the Church. Peter had just responded to His question with his bold statement ...

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. 'For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, & on this rock foundation I will build my church, & not even death will ever be able to overcome it.'"

"On this rock foundation I will build my church."

And the "rock foundation" that Jesus was referring to was not Peter himself ... but rather his confession.

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

We, as a congregation, recognize & worship Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God ...

which is also clearly spelled out in our charter.

"We affirm our faith in Jesus Christ as the full & adequate revelation of God. By His life, death & resurrection we are made whole, becoming aware of our true selves & discovering the purpose of our existence."

And that's exactly what Jesus wanted His disciples to realize. They had been with Him for over 2 years. They had witnessed His miracles, heard Him teach, observed Him doing good. (The Acts 10:38)

But did they know who He really was? ...

So, in the winter before His death, Jesus brought His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi where He revealed to them that He was, beyond a shadow of a doubt ... the long-awaited Messiah.

Caesarea Philippi was where the headwaters of the Jordan River began. Snow-capped Mt. Herman could be seen in the distance. The Sea of Galilee was less than 5 miles away. It's where Herod the Great built a huge white marble temple to Augustus Caesar to celebrate his "divinity". Anyone coming close to the city couldn't help seeing the sun glistening off the marble dome.

The region of Caesarea Philippi was scattered with no fewer than 14 temples to the ancient Syrian Baal gods.

Plus, the huge temple to the nature god Pan was located there.

So, picture the scene. Here's this homeless Galilean carpenter, with 12 very ordinary men, standing in the middle of this area that's just littered with pagan splendor & Roman power. And here of all places, He asks "the" question, & expects a certain answer.

He deliberately puts Himself in this place.

Jesus wants to know, who the people on the street, think He is; not the Pharisees, not the religious leaders, but the common, everyday people.

I don't think I'm being unfaithful to Scripture by saying it's as if Jesus were walking down Campbell Street in Rolling Meadows in the summer of 1954 & asking ... "who do the residents of this new community think I am."

1954-1955 was a tough time. Men & women had recently returned from Europe & the Far East having fought in the "war to end all wars." The Korean police action was coming to an end. There was the atomic bomb, polio, McCarthy hearings, the H-bomb, communism, segregation, the Warsaw Pact, Vietnam, integration, labor union strife.

People were questioning God. Philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre were introducing existentialism, & wondering if God was maybe dead.

Imagine Jesus walking through Rolling Meadows saying, "I know there's lots going on in the world right now. There's much to be worried & concerned about. People have questions about 'religion'."

And so, Jesus asks ... "who do they think I am?"

So, it was back in back in the 1st century. And Jesus asks His followers ... "who do people say the Son of Man is?"

I'm sure the disciples' minds began to race. They wanted to give the "right" answer to Jesus.

They had heard many people refer to Jesus as a Teacher (even though He didn't have the necessary "rabbi" credentials). But even the respected Jewish leader Nicodemus, in talking with Jesus said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God." (John 3:2)

Or, the disciples could have replied, "People say that you're a Physician." Crowds had come from all over to be healed by Him, (Luke 5:15), which the disciples themselves had witnessed. Even so, I'm sure the Galilean Medical Association didn't list Jesus' name as a member.

So, just who was He? ... And how should they answer His question? ...

Above all things Jesus was certainly a man of God.

Well, the disciples responded ...

"Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet."

Who were those men, & why did Jesus remind the people of them? ... Well, they were all prophets, & significant ones at that.

Now a prophet is someone who speaks for God.

From everything we read, both in & outside of Scripture, John the baptizer was an incredible man. (Luke 7:28) He lived out in the desert. And all he did was preach & baptize. And the crowds came from everywhere to hear him. (Matthew 11:7)

And when they came, he spoke boldly to them. He never compromised words. (Matthew 3:7) He told the people that they needed to make a personal commitment with God. It wasn't enough for them just to call themselves Jews. (Luke 3:8) They needed to do more than simply go to worship services each week.

There had to be a personal relationship with the Lord.

Other people said that Jesus reminded them of Elijah. Elijah was the greatest of the prophets of God. He trusted the Lord completely,
& totally expected God to defend Himself.

One of my favorite stories out of the O.T. is Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 18:20-40)

And the result of that encounter was that everyone acknowledged ...

"The LORD is God; the LORD alone is God!" (1 Kings 18:39)

Then there were people who thought that Jesus was Jeremiah come back to life. What kind of a fellow was Jeremiah? He was known as the "weeping prophet."

(Jeremiah 9:1) He was maybe the most Christlike figure in the O.T.

Jeremiah stood up when things were prosperous & warned the people that if they didn't repent, they would be judged & destroyed. Of course, they didn't like hearing that, so they beat him, & threw him in jail.

But he never compromised his message.

So, it's easy to see how Jesus may have reminded people of those 3 strong, Godly men. They were fearless in courage, singular in devotion, & great in self-discipline. To be compared to those 3 was to give Jesus the greatest of compliments.

Now Jesus was a man. He was born of Mary. He lived as a human being on earth for some 33 years.

He "grew & became strong; he was full of wisdom."
(Luke 2:40) He experienced the same weaknesses you & I do. He got hungry, thirsty, & tired. He laughed & cried. He fought temptation. Scripture says He knows what we go through. (Hebrews 4:15)

And, He found it necessary to pray & worship.

But Jesus was more than just a man.
And that's what He was looking for in His question.

Scripture teaches us that He was God.
In fact, Jesus boldly claimed that designation.

He said, "The Father & I are one." (John 10:30)
"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9)
"In the beginning the Word already existed;
the Word was with God, & the Word was God." (John 1:1)

Jesus claimed authority. "I have been given all
authority in heaven & on earth." (Matthew 28:18) Jesus
forgave sins. He said, "I will prove to you, then, that the
Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."
(Mark 2:10)

No prophet or priest ever claimed to be able to do that.

Jesus had authority over nature. Having calmed a
violent storm by simply speaking a word, the disciples
said to one another, "He gives orders to the winds &
waves, & they obey him!" (Luke 8:25)

Jesus had authority over the demons. Having
witnessed one such case the people in attendance stated,
"This man has authority to give orders to the evil spirits,
& they obey him!" (Mark 1:27)

Jesus was certainly more than just a man.

Now let's look at the 2nd question, because there's a
big difference between the 2. "Who do people (out
there) say the Son of Man is?"

And, "who do you say I am?"

Let's get personal with this, because that's the real issue here. Everybody has heard of Jesus, & has an opinion about Him. A recent Gallup Poll indicates that 8 out of 10 Americans consider themselves to be "Christians".

But Jesus wants more than an opinion,
He's asking for a personal assessment.

And that's what happened on that 20 February 1955 morning. It's as if Jesus were standing at the pulpit in The Barn, & asking those in attendance ...

"what about you, who do you say I am."

That morning Nadine Cranmer & Lorraine Schroeder, were faced with the same question that the 12 heard over 1,900 years earlier.

"Who do you say that Jesus Christ is?"

In fact, everyone who has joined C.C.R.M. in the past 63 years has also had to deal with it.

Who is Jesus Christ ... really?

Back in November 1971, in Mannheim, Germany, a young evangelist from Chicago named Sammy Tippit directed that question to me. And I acknowledged that Jesus Christ was my Lord & Savior.

And because of that moment, my life has never been the same. Jesus is my God ... & therefore,
He deserves my worship.

And so it was for C.C.R.M. Jesus Christ is the "rock foundation" of our existence. We are a community of Christ followers. That's what we are as a Church ... a community of Christ followers,
seeking to be like Him every day.

10 years ago, our congregation, as one of our mission projects supported "Gospel For India." It was ministry involved in actually building churches in the northern region of that country.

And we had Mammen Mathew here telling us about it from this pulpit. (His daughter came along to interpret for him.) Do any of you remember that? ...

Mammen shared about his visit to an ancient city in that country. There, on the edge of the community, where no one cared any longer, was an old fort.

He said, "I went out to see the fort, & was startled to realize, that although it hadn't been used for 100's of years, that there were still guards standing at the gates holding ancient spears & wearing red blousy uniforms that would have been perfectly useless in contemporary battle. They held a fort that nobody wanted."

That fort was irrelevant to the life of the people
in the city.

You know, Mammen could have been talking about
some of today's churches.

Carrying on their customs & traditions on the edge of town, doing what they'd done for years & years & years ... & nobody cared. Their power was gone. The relevance was missing.

The people don't know what the issues are.

God help us to never be a Church like that.

By His grace we have been here for 63 years! But our primary role in Rolling Meadows is not to hold a CORNFEST on the 1st Saturday in August. It's not to offer a place for locals to buy Christmas trees in December. It's not to offer an alternative to the hustle & bustle of the holiday season with a Dinner Theatre.

If Jesus were standing here right now, I suspect He might say, "My purpose for building C.C.R.M. was to be salt for the citizens of this new community. (Matthew 5:13)

I want you to be a light directing everyone to me."

(Matthew 5:16)

We've had a wonderful heritage, that many of you have contributed to over the years. And it's neat thinking back how it all began in the Barn 63 years ago.

But remember the fort that Mammen saw in India.

We must be relevant in our service to Jesus in 2018. We must continue to "go to all peoples & make them His disciples, baptizing them, & teaching them to obey everything He commanded." (Matthew 28:19-20) Let's do it!

MARANA THA