

## **“Adopting an African-American Model of Church”**

**Matthew 16:13-20**

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Many years ago, I attended a breakout session at a CBF General Assembly that focused on ways churches could transcend racial differences and divisions. The leader of this session was an African-American pastor who was on the CBF Coordinating Council as an expression of CBF’s interest in diversity. In those early days, it was a genuine though naïve hope which struggled to show much in the way of results, but over time has come to accomplish some good things.

Anyway, the pastor asked us what question we thought he heard most often as he went about trying to bring new people into his church. For what were people looking? We named the usual things like worship style, church facilities, denominational affiliation, children’s and youth programs. With each new suggestion, he simply said, “No.”

Finally, when we had run out of ideas, he said, “The question I am asked most often is, ‘What are you doing in the community?’ In other words, ‘What are you doing that affects people right where they live, work and play?’ That’s what people want to know. That’s what people are looking for in an African-American church.”

It was news to us, a wake-up call for multicultural work, and as I have reflected on this dialogue, I have come to believe that churches like ours may need to adopt an African-American model of church, at least in this regard. It’s not that all those other things we named don’t matter. It’s just that for many younger people today and people not involved in church, the most critical questions are about things like authenticity, whether we live in a way that is consistent with what we claim to believe; and whether we speak to issues that matter in everyday life, whether we are doing anything in the community.

The question is whether this approach fits our tradition, not just FBC tradition, but biblical tradition. I think it does and we need look no further for proof than the text we have read today from Matthew 16.

It is a familiar story with themes that lie at the heart of Christian faith. The setting is Caesarea Philippi, modern-day Banias, the site of altars to many different gods. For those who have been there, it just makes sense that Jesus asks the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” in this location.

The disciples name various identities others attribute to Jesus – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, some other prophet – and when Jesus asks the follow-up question about what they believe, Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” He doesn’t know what he is talking about, as we soon discover. He is thinking about a political savior, not one who dies on a cross. But Peter realizes Jesus is more than just another prophet or teacher. So, Jesus praises him for his response and says that on faith like Peter’s, he will build his church.

Clearly what we believe is important. It shapes the manner in which we live. Confessing Christ as Savior and Lord, in light of many other potential loyalties, as we do in baptism, is a critical step on the Christian journey. But it is also important to understand our confession. Like Peter, we are ever learning more about who Jesus is and how he would have us to live. Thus, baptism is just the beginning of the journey, not the end, the start of a more intimate relationship with God. And where this relationship leads is to a whole new way of life.

Jesus doesn’t say much here about what this life involves, but he does talk about a different way elsewhere, the way of love and justice, the way of sacrifice and self-giving. In today’s reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul says we ought not be conformed to this world, but rather be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are not just like everyone else, if we are Jesus people, he is saying.

But Jesus does add one thing of significance in the reading from Matthew. He says that the gates of Hades will not prevail against his church. It is a powerful statement, not about our security, but about our witness in the world. Unfortunately we tend to miss the point. Jesus says the gates of Hades, or Hell in some translations, the word refers to the realm of the dead, the powers of death and evil... The gates of Hell will not prevail against us, he says, and we think of ourselves being protected from evil. But what exactly is a gate?

Dana and I spent 10 days in Scotland earlier this summer celebrating our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary as many of you know. I have talked about this a little bit... One of the things I love most about the country is the castles, so many magnificent castles - Edinburgh and Stirling Castles, Cawdor and Urquhart Castles, and Doune Castle, of course, where scenes from *Monty Python* and *Outlander* were shot.

The castles vary in many different ways - size, shape, materials. Some are intact, some are just remains. But all have one thing in common – a gate. And the gate always serves the same purposes - to allow some to enter and to keep others out. A gate is an instrument of defense, a way of protecting space, not an offensive weapon.

So, when Jesus says the gates of Hell will not prevail against his church, the image is not of evil pressing in on his followers who prevail, remain strong, hold on to faith. The image is of the church going into the world and taking the battle to the powers of evil and death.

It is a very different image, an image of the church sent into the world to take goodness and compassion, kindness and justice, hope and salvation everywhere. It is an image very much like the one we find recorded at the very end of Matthew, the words of the Great Commission – Go ye in to all the world and make disciples of all nations... “Jesus said, ‘Go ye,’” a colleague said, “not, ‘Y’all come!’” It is an image of the church making a difference in the community.

The question is – how do we do this? One way is by the manner in which we live. We are the people Paul describes as transformed by the renewal of our minds, we are Jesus people, we are different. We don’t go along with bullying. We don’t laugh at jokes which make fun of others. We are sensitive to those who are hurting. We are honest when it benefits us and when it does not. We are full of love and kindness no matter what. We are willing to talk about why we are different. We make a difference in the community by being who we are.

Another way we can make a difference is through specific endeavors we pursue as a church, like our clothing ministry, building Habitat Houses, singing Christmas carols in nursing homes, having small groups like Theology on Tap. Christ Church had for a time a

Community Nurse who went into the community where homeless people were and assessed and responded to medical needs of the homeless. She knew the people from having worked at a shelter, and brought along a police officer in some situations, but she was a nurse on the street. That is one way of the church making a difference in the community.

So, we can make a difference in our individual lives and through church endeavors, and we can make a difference by speaking up for others, by engaging in advocacy. I know this makes some of us nervous. And we need to ground our involvement in biblical teachings and be clear about for whom we speak. Sometimes we can speak with one voice as a church, sometimes we cannot. But even in the latter cases, those who feel compelled should speak on their own behalf.

Sometimes it just means showing up, like the non-Jews who attended Sabbath services in Charlottesville when Neo-Nazis stood across the street holding semi-automatic rifles. Sometimes it may involve speaking up at a public meeting, like when our city considered issues related to the poor being fed in Moore Square. But there are times when our faith compels us to do more than live kind and gentle lives and extend ministries of compassion.

Moses went to Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go.” Nathan confronted David over his sin with Bathsheba. Jesus came face to face with Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod, and Paul confronted many public officials. To pursue partisan politics as a church is unwise, potentially illegal and certainly un-Baptist. But to declare public life off-limits is unbiblical and self-defeating. The only thing a so-called “prevent defense” prevents a football team from doing is playing defense. Jesus sends his church into the world to make disciples and spread love and justice, and he says the gates of Hell will not prevail against us.

So, maybe it’s time to adopt an African-American model of church, at least in this regard. We live in a time when the world is not coming to us. The church is no longer the center of community life. We will have to go to the world. But that’s what Jesus calls to do. “Go ye into all the world... and the gates of Hell will not prevail against you.”