

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: January 27, 2013
Sermon Title: Why Are We Here?
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-19
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 16:13-19

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, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' 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. 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

"Why Are We Here?" Good sermon title, good question. If you look at the sign outside of the church, it says we've been here since 1725, 288 years on the exact same spot doing the exact same thing: being church. But what is that? What does it mean to be a church? Why are we here?

For the second week in a row, our scripture lesson is something we have been studying recently in our weekly Bible study, which we call "The Gathering." That's interesting in itself, "The Gathering." That's the actual definition of "church," a "gathering." The word existed before Christianity. Whenever people in the town gathered, it was called an "ecclesia," or gathering, sort of like a "Town Meeting."

I remember the Sunday I was hired at this church. I was brought in to preach, like a "tryout" or an audition. It was very interesting. There were lots of announcements and prayer concerns, and a guy got up and announced a big fertilizer sale. "Lots of fertilizer available at church," he promised, and then I got up to preach. I was struck by the close proximity of

my preaching and plenty of fertilizer available. But what really struck me was how much church at Greenfield Hill felt like an old-fashioned New England "Town Meeting," a gathering. At "The Gathering," we are studying the Gospel of Mark, but for today we are using Matthew's version of the same story.

So in our scripture lesson, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you think I am? What do you make of me? What do you think I'm up to? What am I about? Why am I here?" Well, the disciples tried to guess, mostly. They figured he was some sort of "holy man," a guru, a great teacher, a prophet, God's spokesman, somebody really, really important. And then St. Peter says, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

Whoa! That's big. For the first time, somebody was willing to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was a world-shaking, earth shattering game-changer, a new paradigm, a true seismic shift in the relationship between God and humanity. This was God. Here. With us. At that point, Jesus put his hand on Peter's shoulder and said, "On this rock I will build my church."

That's the first time the word "church" appears in the Bible, and Jesus chose a word that symbolized a gathering, a town meeting. Jesus was saying, on that faith, on that understanding, Jesus would build his team, his network, his group, his movement, his gathering. The Church. The Bible has lots of other names for people to gather together in the name of "Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The church has been known as the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ. A ship. A building. An anchor. A community. A family. The Elect. The Children of God. The Way. The Communion of Saints. A Peculiar People. The New Israel. The New Jerusalem. The New Temple. A Holy Nation. The People of God. The Church.

Likewise, there is an infinite variety of churches, of styles. Little churches and big churches. Stone, wood, or brick churches. Church where the music is led by a rock band or a full orchestra or just a piano or no music at all. Church where people stand with their arms uplifted and pray, swaying back and forth, or speaking in tongues or dancing in the spirit or jumping up and down. And church where it's quiet, orderly; or church where there is no order at all, everything is spontaneous; and church where every single thing comes from the prayer book. There's church where the preacher is more important or the choir or prayer or handling snakes.

There's Cowboy Church. Celebrity Church. Mega-church. Mall Church. Churches based on language, race, ethnicity. But somewhere in the middle of all the differences and divisions, in ways large and small, they all hearken back to Peter's groundbreaking declaration: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of

the Living God." Every church under the sun, even if it's forgotten it or watered it down or left behind, at some point people gathered together, drawn together by the idea that this Jesus fellow was very special, very important, and worth knowing better, deeper, fuller.

That's why we are here. Jesus, his life, his teachings, his purpose. That's the unifying force for 288 years of Greenfield Hill Church. There's something about him worth knowing, worth following, worth being. We call that Christ-likeness; the church is the face of Jesus in our world. But even that face has different looks for different people at different times.

Some years ago, a young woman started coming to my church. She was a broken person, shattered by life's disappointments, beaten down, defeated, hurting. So she showed up at our church and was very faithful for about two months. And then she disappeared. She called one day to tell me she couldn't come back. Our church was too friendly. People talked with her, showed interest in her, befriended her. So she found another church in the next town, a really big Catholic church, a cathedral, with huge columns right in the sanctuary. She could go there anonymously. She found a pew right behind one of the columns. Nobody could see her, not even the priest.

That was church — both of them. My over-the-top, touchy feely, "So glad to see ya'," no-place-to-hide country church and the big stone, cavernous, anonymous, with columns-to-hide-behind church — they were both church for somebody, each in its own way, for someone at just the right time, both offering "Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Which is not to say we all agree on what Jesus was or is. Even Peter really didn't really know what he meant when he declared, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." We know what we want Peter to mean. Two thousand years later, we have correct doctrines, well-thought-out theology, creeds. We have the Holy Trinity, with Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity, "very God of very God," pre-existent with God, who sits at the right hand of God, while still being God, and unified as One God.

We've got all that figured out. We've argued about it for 2,000 years and killed off those who disagreed. But Peter didn't know any of that. He says, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God," then almost immediately proceeds to argue with Jesus, to boss him around, correct him, reject him, deny him, abandon him, and even refuses to believe the Easter story! That doesn't sound like someone who had it all figured out. But he was trying. And that's what church is for. We gather together as a people trying to know Jesus, to meet Jesus, to be Christlike. Like Jesus.

But seriously, do we really need to actually GO to church? Can't we just stay home, sleep late, watch some TV religion, maybe think about God now and then, even thank him for this or that? Maybe send a check and do some good from time to time? Isn't that O.K.? Do we really need a building, with all that expense, and hymns and boards and committees and reports and Annual Meetings and a Dogwood Festival and youth groups and Sunday School and sermons and clergy? Can't we just be inspired by sunset, a rainbow, nature?

When I was in college, I didn't go to church much, but I did go to the local Baptist church in Hamilton, New York, from time to time. Often enough to stir a response from my fraternity brothers. I rolled out of bed some Sunday mornings (no one else would even be up), and I'd stumble downtown, sleepy-eyed, bed-headed, ruffled. Walk into church. Some old lady or young family would beckon me to sit with them. They'd open the hymnbook for me. They always smiled at me. They never frowned when I fell asleep during the sermon. They always took me to coffee hour and told me they missed me if I hadn't been there in a while, but never as a criticism.

Eventually I got back to my fraternity house. My friends would all be in the kitchen making breakfast. No one really made fun of me, but they all said basically the same thing over the years. Probably the same thing many of you have heard when you tell people you go to church. My friends would say, "I don't need to go to church. I can worship God out in the backyard."

Here is the honest-to-God truth. My friends were absolutely 100 percent correct. You can "worship God in the backyard." But no one ever did. We used the frat house backyard for hazing, touch football, pledge initiation, keg parties, and random acts of oblivion. But no one ever went back there to worship God.

I think that's why Jesus told Peter, "Together, we are going to build a church, a gathering, a community." Jesus knew that something happens, something richer, deeper, fuller, better, when we gather together. Church is there for our best intentions. We *could* worship God in the backyard. But it's more likely to happen in the little church down the road or up on the hill. Church organizes our best intentions.

Yes, we want to "love God with all our hearts."

Yes, we want to "love our neighbors."

Yes, we want to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us."

Yes, we want to "go the extra mile and turn the other cheek."

Yes, we want to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the lonely."

Yes, we want to "worship God in the beauty of holiness."

And, yes, we can do all that in the backyard.

But it's more likely to happen in this little old white clapboard building, it's more likely to start here, to get energized and motivated here.

The church is wherever people respond to the idea that Jesus is the Christ. And therefore ... therefore ... The church is what follows after the "therefore." Jesus is the Christ. Therefore ... the church takes what Jesus is, what Jesus says, what Jesus does, and the church is the organized result of that.

Two quick examples, and I'm done. Two weeks ago Alida sent out an e-mail. A 14-year-old girl had had a baby and she's overwhelmed by need, by expenses, by motherhood. Her social worker asked us to help. You folks jumped in. You wanted to help. You wanted to do more. Some even helped Alida take your donations to the young mom. That was church. That counts.

Last Friday we had our first "Greenfield Hill Church at the Movies" night, hosted by our Adult Education Committee. The film is a beautiful movie, "The Way," starring Martin Sheen and written by his son Emilio Estevez. It's the story of a grieving dad, completing his dead son's pilgrimage along a real and famous pilgrimage route from France to Spain called "El Camino de Santiago," "The Way of St. James." Don't forget, I told you earlier that one of the earliest names for church was "The Way." Well, this pilgrimage route is also "The Way," and people have been walking it, 600 miles, for more than a thousand years.

In the movie, Martin Sheen begins the pilgrimage, The Way, as a broken, bitter, grief-stricken dad, walled off from everybody else. Nobody else is worth knowing. The other pilgrims on "The Way" are just obstacles, annoyances, even threats. There's the fat guy from the Netherlands. The obnoxious guy from Ireland. The angry woman from Canada. The cancerous priest from New York. But "The Way" has a way of smoothing rough edges. "The Way" has a way of gathering people together. "The Way" has a way. Mile by mile, day by day, the angers fade, hurts heal, faith grows, life happens. And that's church.

And that's a pretty good description of this little old New England church, this "gathering." We are on the way: 288 years after the first gathering, we're still on the way. We have this Jesus. He's important to us. He is at the heart of what we do. And he's on the way with us.

One hundred twenty years ago, this little church had another pastor with the same idea, Timothy Dwight. He made this church special before he went on

to make Yale special. He did both because he knew Jesus was special, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Timothy Dwight loved church, and his most famous hymn celebrates church, "I Love Your Church, O God." We call it the "Greenfield Hill Church hymn." Let us stand and sing it as our anthem.

I Love Your Church, O God

Timothy Dwight

*I love your church, O God,
on earth your blest abode,
the people our redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your church, O God,
whose walls before you stand,
dear as the apple of your eye,
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall,
in love my prayers ascend,
to serve your church, my toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys,
I prize your people's ways,
the sweet communion, solemn vows,
the hymns of love and praise*

*Sure as your truth shall last,
to Zion shall be given
the brightest glories earth can yield,
and brighter bliss of heaven.*

(Dwight, Timothy. "I Love Your Church, O God" (No. 274) in Chalice Hymnal. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995.)