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Sermon Title: "This Is Church"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-19

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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.'

This is a fine Scripture for a Church like ours, where probably half of our people grew up Catholic. The differences between Protestants and Catholics mostly have to do with style and structure. Catholics have grander architecture, better robes for the clergy, greater art, longer history. But on the basics of the Bible we pretty much agree. Yes, they do more with candles and incense, but we're catching up. They have more saints. They like Mary a lot, but so do I. Supposedly, the Catholics make much more of tradition, but I don't know about that.

You know the joke *How many New England Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb? What? Change?! My great-grandparents gave that light bulb!*

So we have a lot in common. Today's Scripture, however, is one of the big differences. To summarize: Jesus asked his Disciples who people think he really is. What's the talk? They offer up a few historical comparisons before Jesus asks, very pointedly, "Who do you say that I am? What do you think?" Boldly, Peter, St. Peter, declares, "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God!"

That's pretty big. Peter is the first, the first Disciple, the first among Jesus's followers and family, the first person on earth to make that connection between God and Jesus. "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God."

Now, here's the tricky Protestant/Catholic divide. Right after that declaration of faith, Jesus gives Peter his name. Before that, he was Simon; and on the spot, in honor of that statement of faith, he's given the name Peter, which means "rock." Then Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my Church." So, for Catholics it's pretty clear. Jesus renames Simon to Peter. Peter means "rock." Jesus promises to build his Church on that rock. Peter is the rock. Peter is the first pope. All popes are the successors of St. Peter. Popes sit on the throne of St. Peter. And popes, directly ordained by Christ, are the clear authorities over the Church.

And that authority gets spelled out. Jesus says, "I will give you the keys of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. And the gates of hell will not prevail." In other words, in the Catholic perspective, Peter and Peter's successors as leaders of the Church are given total control: Whatever they decide goes.

Not so fast, Protestants say, because, well, Protestants are ornery by nature. We are disgruntled by nature. What are the first two-thirds of the word "Protestant"? The first seven letters? *Protest!* That's why Protestants are mostly famous for division. One group breaking off from another into denominations. Do you realize there are 33,000 denominations in the world, over 300 in America? There are seven Baptist Churches within 6 miles of here from seven different Baptist denominations, each doing its own thinking.

So, for Protestants, it is equally clear: the rock is Peter's clear-eyed confession of faith, the dramatic declaration that Jesus is the Christ, the Chosen One of God, the Messiah, the Son of God. That's the rock. And those who know it are the Church.

In a nutshell, for Catholics the burden falls on St. Peter, the leader; for Protestants the burden falls on us, the believers. For Catholics everybody thinks the pope is the pope. For Protestants, everybody thinks they are the pope! That is an exaggeration, tongue-in-cheek, a bad attempt at humor, and somewhat true all at the same time.

Of course, there is an upside and a downside to any structure, but for today, I want us to see the upside of our own little rugged individualism as a Church.

As I said earlier, the Protestant interpretation of today's Scripture puts the onus on us to be the Church. We can't put the blame on or give the credit to the Vatican, the priesthood, the bishops, the cardinals, or the pope. For us, we are

the “rock” upon which this Church is built. We are either good at it, or we’re not. We either do it right, or we don’t. It’s on us.

Someone said the other day that we’re always asking for something, and they’re right. We’re asking for Sunday School teachers, adults to go to Appalachia, food to feed the poor, people to serve on committees, dollars to fuel this ministry. It’s all on us.

After the annual meeting I’m convening the first meeting of our 300th Anniversary Committee. If it’s something you’d like to work on, let me know. We’ll need a lot of hands. That White Paper I wrote is a guide toward 2025, and it has gotten a lot of thoughtful response. The most surprising thing people ask is about my “succession plan.” What will happen after you _____? But at least no one said, “after you’re dead.” So I guess they mean my retirement. I’ll give you three answers:

First, I didn’t spend my summer writing a White Paper to guide us seven years down the road only to give it to somebody else. Second, my father and grandfather retired at 86. Third, my knee doctor wants to replace my knee replacements with new knees, and I’m not going through all that hell just so I can sit around doing nothing. As Martin Luther said, “Here I stand!” But our 300th anniversary has got people thinking and talking, and I love it.

In a recent Bible study, we talked about Jesus telling a young man, “Sell all you have and give it to the poor,” leading some to ask, “What if we applied that to our Church? Instead of all this effort to stay strong, all this money going into being alive, why not give it all away?” Sell our properties, cash in our endowment and savings, spread the wealth, close up shop.

Depends on the purpose of our Church. I see this old Church as an engine that drives the spiritual energy of a thousand people, and that energy steers the lives of thousands more, many thousands more, near and far.

Let me close with this: Two weeks ago was as ugly a Sunday as you could get. Holiday weekend. Torrential rains. Freezing cold. Flooded streets. Plus, our sanctuary was closed, so we had to meet in the Memorial Room. If ever there was a day to turn off the alarm, roll over, go back to sleep, and skip Church, January 20 was it. Heck, I thought of staying home myself.

Instead, we had good crowds at both services, with extraordinary music—Lincoln Center caliber—with a Gospel/Spiritual solo by David White that left us breathless; and Alida’s sermon, partnered with the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., did things with the Bible that defied gravity and wore out the Holy Spirit.

We had "Church" to die for, which is precisely what Jesus was soon to do after looking Peter in the eye, and you and me, and saying, "On you, on all of you St. Peters and not-so St. Peters, on you and whatever mustard seed of faith you can muster, on the likes of you, on top of this little hill, I will build my Church."

As we begin our 294th year, I think we do Church right . . . and I think St. Peter would agree!

Let's close with Hymn No 274, "I Love Your Church, O God." Also known as the "Greenfield Hill Church Hymn," it was written by Timothy Dwight, one of our earliest pastors.

*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.*