

12th Sunday After Pentecost August 23, 2020

Matthew 16:13-20, Romans 12:1-8

On March 2, 1856, St. John became an organized congregation under the leadership of the Rev. H.T. Ealy. At that time, worship services were held at the Banner Valley Log School on the Carrie Worley farm. This was 20 years before the town of Ely was even established. It was 1886 when the congregation purchased a building from the Methodists in North Liberty and placed it at 1420 Walker St. on the present location of the church. For almost 165 years, St. John Lutheran Church has been the Body of Christ in the area around Ely. We give thanks to God for our ancestors in the faith and their faithfulness to the Gospel. For their willingness to answer the question, “Who do you say that I am” as clearly as Peter did, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Having this kind of history behind our assembly has many benefits. It roots us in a place and a people, gives a clear story for us to join ourselves to, one specific to this place. That kind of story is what people are pointing to when Jesus asks what they have been saying about who he is. Some look to recent events, “They say you are another John the Baptist!” Others look to the story of they are part of, “Some say you are Elijah come to prepare the way for the Messiah, or Jeremiah or another prophet come to warn us that we are going astray.” The community of the Jewish people would know these stories and nod their heads in understanding about what this meant.

Yet there are challenges that can come from this kind of long history. One of the primary challenges comes when people begin to feel that the church is theirs.

That it belongs to their family or to several families because these are the ones who have founded it, who have tended it for most or all of those 165 years. Now, to be fair, this kind of attitude is understandable. These early families: the Fuhrmeister, Smyth, Krob, Worley, Stream, and Startzer families, along with others, have indeed sustained this outpost of the Body of Christ through the years. Their ancestors were married in this place, sang hymns, received the Word and Sacrament, offered and were given comfort when they grieved, baptized their children here, buried their relatives from here. They sustained this place with their sweat and resources. It is only natural to feel a deep and abiding connection to this church. A sense of responsibility to care for it.

The problem comes when that morphs into a sense of ownership. That they are the ones who are making the decisions about what goes on here, how things will be run, the direction we take because of that history. Jesus and Paul recognize this human tendency and they both counteract it in the way they talk about the church.

Jesus asks Peter, “What are you adding to this conversation in town about who I am?” Peter’s response is actually not surprising- it is the same one he and the disciples gave two weeks ago in the story about Jesus walking on the water. Do you remember what they did once Jesus grabbed Peter as he sank and got back into the boat, stilling the storm? The disciples worshipped him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God!” Peter’s response today echoes that, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus response to Peter’s confession does two things that mitigate the problem of thinking we own the church. First, he reminds us that even faith is a gift, “Blessed

are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” It is God in and through the Holy Spirit who transforms our lives by the gift faith. Who reveals to us the truth of who Jesus is. Second, Jesus reminds us who the church belongs to, “on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” The church is not Peter’s. It is not mine, nor yours, nor any of our ancestors. It does not belong to Joel Osteen, or Pope Benedict, or our new Bishop Elect Amy Current. The church belongs to Jesus. To God.

Paul does a similar thing in his letters. The church, he says, is the body of Christ and Christ is the head of the church. It is Christ who directs where the church goes, what it does, how it lives. Provides the thought and impetus in all we do.

The church, then, is like everything else we have in this life- a gift given to us by God which we do not own, but from which we benefit, and of which we are stewards- caretakers. Because we are stewards, we take time to consult with the owner when we want to make any changes, so that what we do might be in accordance with his wishes. We do this through prayer, asking for God’s help in discerning our path. Listening for the voice of God calling us. Reading the Word of God in scripture prayerfully, discussing with one another how we can be faithful in the way we go.

It is good also to remember that the church is not the building. The word used for church in the New Testament, *ekklesia*, means assembly. It refers to a gathering of people called together around specific things. So, the church is not the structures that have been damaged in Cedar Rapids, as so many of our Lutheran congregations have. As our hymn of the day will remind us, even when steeples

are falling and spires have crumbled, the church still exists. It exists in the living stones that are the faithful believers. I have seen the church in action these past weeks, even as their structures are cracked and broken- the assembly of believers, the church, have been out and about- feeding the hungry, clearing debris and tarping roofs, offering comfort.

The church, as Paul reminds us with his language, is a Body, there are many members or parts, each with unique gifts, abilities, and responsibilities. This means that St. John is both the full assembly of believers who gather here (virtually or in person), AND it is each of you individually.

The church is the assembly of believers- a gathering of followers of Jesus gifted with faith and charged with the stewardship of this congregation, this means by which the Kingdom of heaven breaks through into the world. This keeps us from making the mistake of thinking that I am the church. That it exists solely in me and my beliefs. It puts me in relationship with others, conversation and discernment with them about the way in which we should go to faithfully follow Jesus.

And yet, like a hand or foot, like an eye or ear, when any part of the body acts, it is acting as a member of that body. When you go into this world you are the Body of Christ, you are the church at work. So, St. John does not just exist when we assemble, but it exists in each of you. As you work, as you play, when you are at home and when you travel. When you were helping your neighbors recover these past two weeks, you were St. John, the church, at work in Ely and Cedar Rapids, and Solon, and Swisher and Shueyville, and Mt. Vernon. When you deliver buns and meat to meal sites, you are the church at work. When you comfort your

friend, help tutor a student, offer aid to someone in need, you are the church at work.

These tensions between the whole assembly and the uniqueness of the members are what help safeguard the church from ourselves. It bounds us with the understanding that we are part of what makes church, but not all of it, so we need to be in relationship with other believers to keep us from hijacking what belongs to Christ.

It also means that each of us goes into our daily lives with the responsibility of being a visible sign of the church wherever we are. We live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven when we are at school. When we are at work. When we are out hunting and farming. When we are out boating and hiking. In this way, the congregation of St. John has outposts in every nearby community, because you are there.

It also means that to be the church, we need YOU. We need your God given gifts. We need your wisdom, your insight, your talents. If you've been worshipping with us these last 5 months, we're so glad you are here- but if you do not already belong to a church, consider whether this might be your faith home. Consider officially joining us. If you aren't baptized yet, I'd be more than happy to talk with you about that sacrament.

To truly be Christ's church, the Body of Christ, we need every member to be generous with what God has given them... especially now. We need your imagination and experience for how we can provide engaging mostly online education and worship. We need your willingness to serve as ushers and other volunteers when we can meet in person. We need each of you to share in the

discernment of how we are called to be church at this moment in history. We need your generosity in financially supporting the work that we do- to help ensure that when we can meet in person again we have this beautiful building to return to.

We need you, because each of you is a uniquely and wonderfully made creation of God. A beloved child of God claimed as such in the waters of baptism. We need you, because the work of the church happens best when the Body works together.

So please, email us and offer those gifts. Share with us the ways God has gifted you. You can support us best financially by signing up for our online giving option. Sunday school is starting soon and we can use your expertise. Mostly, in this time of digital connection, we just need to know you are out there- an active part of this assembly- so please like or comment on the videos, join us for virtual fellowship, come join the outdoor worship on September 13.

We have been given this church and this wonderful congregation of St. John as a gift to steward. As we strive together to preserve and grow the church, we do so knowing that Christ is our foundation for both our work together and for each of our lives. And as we look at the work we have been called to in this moment in history, may we not be daunted by the task but energized with the reminder that with Christ, in Christ, together... all things are possible.