

On Which Rock?-VIRTUAL EDITION
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Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
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Year A - 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 16:13-20

It's been a rough few decades for the Presbyterian church in America.

We have seen membership in our denomination steadily decline, as it has for most of our other mainstream brother and sister denominations. We have long since lost our place as the center of the community, the primary teachers of morality, ethics and virtue. We have all but dropped out of the public eye.

So things were already in pretty sad shape when earlier this year we were sucker-punched by COVID-19. The pandemic forced us to close our doors to live worship and fellowship. This was obviously not the first national or international disaster that put the American church to the test but the pandemic is particularly vicious in that it prevents us from doing what we do best during a crisis: provide a place of comfort and prayer, a shelter from the storm. This time, the storm came right in the front door and made itself at home.

Westminster, at least, is blessed with a generous congregation and a pretty solid base of financial resources. Far too many churches right now are pondering whether they will survive long enough to resume live worship when the pandemic tidal wave has at last receded. Their existence is dangling by a thread.

If anyone wants to use the labels "dire" or "life-threatening" to describe the condition of the American church in 2020, I won't argue. We could well see thousands of individual churches fold before all of this is over.

But, as I've said many times before, if we think that this is the first time the church as an

institution has faced extinction then we have very short memories. The church has had to fight for its very life many times in the past couple of millenia. Indeed, you might go so far as to say that the stable and prosperous church that most of us remember from our youth was more the aberration than the norm. The mid-20th century was an oasis of calm in the history of the Christian church, a history that has seen far more strife and division than peace and unity.

Have we forgotten where we came from? If so, and if we are serious about helping the Christian church survive the COVID-19 crisis, then this would be an excellent time to go back and re-acquaint ourselves with how the church came to be and the many crises it has weathered.

The New Testament is many things. It is the written witness to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the ultimate theological commentary on those events. It is also a chronicle of the earliest days of the church and at times a rather graphic description of the impediments the early church faced and the barriers which it had to overcome.

Our Matthew reading today takes us back to one of the foundational moments in the history of the church. Jesus declares that the disciple Simon, whom He nicknames “Peter” or “The Rock,” is the foundation on which the new church will be built. In order to make that happen, Peter was given extraordinary authority to interpret and articulate the meaning of Scripture, which was what “binding” and “loosing” referred to in the early rabbinic tradition. At this very very early stage in the development of the church, Jesus was already making provisions for the future, making sure that an authoritative voice would remain after He ascended.

If we think that the future of the church is dicey today, what did it say when Jesus appointed a former fisherman, a man with no formal training in theology, preaching or church administration, as the first head of the new church? In the highly stratified society of Judea, Peter

would have been regarded as an ordinary working-class stiff. He certainly had no influence among the rich and the powerful. And who did Peter have to help him move forward with the mission of the new church? Eleven other commoners and peasants. Objectively speaking, this was not a promising start, at least from our narrow human point of view.

Even today, when the church seems to be at its lowest ebb in recent memory, we have more tools and more material resources than Peter could have dreamed possible. All Peter and the other disciples had going for them was faith. That's it. Faith. It was a faith that might at the time have seemed misguided but look what happened. Without large sanctuaries, endowments, Sunday School classrooms, choir robes or even a written Gospel, Peter and his compatriots nourished the seed that Jesus had planted. And that seed grew into a church, the church.

I think that I have pretty well established in the last six years that I am not one to sugarcoat bad news. I am not one to deny reality when reality turns ugly. We can't solve the church's problems by throwing a coat of whitewash over them.

These are the times when faith matters most. Not a blind faith that causes us to sit back and assume God will magically fix everything but an active and engaged faith that motivates us to confront challenges head on and do our level best to overcome them even, or maybe especially, when they seem insurmountable.

Do we have that faith? Can we practice that faith? Can we put our faith to work and help the church survive this crisis and position itself to thrive in post-pandemic America? If I didn't think so, I wouldn't be sitting here right now doing my best to preach the Gospel honestly in an empty room with a camera running. I have faith. It's a faith in God, obviously, but it's also a faith in you, a faith in us, a faith in the collective potential we possess to serve as a rocks for the

foundation of the next phase of the Christian church.

Fifty years from now, will the Christian church be a distant memory consigned to history books or will it be a living, breathing institution devoted to doing God's work in the world and serving as a beacon of hope for all? It's up to you. It's up to me. It's up to us. We just need to have faith . . .