

What about the church?

Matthew 16:13-19

Pastor Tom Anderson

I love it when people criticize “organized religion”—I’m still trying to find it! Have you seen my desk? Have you ever been to a church council meeting?

It’s clear from the gospels that Jesus set out to organize the church. He selected 12 Apostles. He taught them about leadership and discipline. He instituted Holy Communion. He created a mission statement. He even promised to be in every gathering of two or three people. Jesus’ intentions seem clear: he wanted to create the church.

The words of Jesus and Peter speak to us today about the meaning of the church. What does it mean to say, “I believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints”? (in the Apostles’ Creed) The acrostic C.H.U.R.C.H. spells out the main points of Jesus and Peter on the church.

We begin with the letter C: *Confession of Faith*. Jesus says that the bedrock of the church is faith in him. Peter confesses, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16) Faith in Christ was, is, and always has been the only membership requirement of the church. Jesus began his ministry with this announcement, “Repent and believe in the Good News.” (Mark 1:15) There is no fee. You don’t need a background check. You don’t need to provide references. You don’t need a mailing address or proof of insurance. You don’t need a social security number or a credit card. You don’t need any diploma. You don’t need to provide details of your previous work experience. Your race, age and income level is not of any interest to God. In fact, you don’t even have to have your life together.

I had a lady call me out of the blue some years ago. She asked me the strangest question on the phone: “How much does it cost to be baptized?” For a moment I was completely disarmed. Regaining myself I responded, “Lady, baptism is free, but it will cost you your life.” That is what faith is: surrendering your life to Jesus Christ. The church cannot be built on anything less than this: lives surrendered to Christ.

The letter H would stand for *His*. Jesus calls it “*my church*.” (Matthew 16:18) This building and all the people, spiritual and financial resources we have don’t belong to the pastor or the people or the bishop or the Annual Conference. They all belong to Jesus. He bought them with his own blood. The Bible says, “...with his blood Jesus purchased men and women... for God to

be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.” (Revelation 5:9, 10) We are merely tenants and stewards in the household of God. When Christ returns, he’s going to be looking for a return on his investment in us. Are we going to look like Bernard Madoff or Warren Buffet when Jesus comes to claim his investment?

The Disney movie *Finding Nemo* contains a scene where Nemo’s father Marlin is being chased by a flock of delightfully obnoxious gulls who are all repeating, “Mine! Mine! Mine!” as they pursue the little fish. Some people come to church with the same attitude, “Mine! Mine! Mine!” This is the attitude of power, control, and domination. A real church says, “His! His! His!” This is the servant attitude. The church is not about me and my preferences, tastes, desires and favorites. It’s about Him and his mission.

The letter U would stand for *Up against Hell* (Matthew 16:18). The church is in a spiritual battle. We are up against the gates of hell and death. Peter wrote, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...” (1 Peter 5:8-9) We are in a struggle against sin and injustice. We are at war with human suffering. We are in combat with darkness. Our weapons are testimony, prayer, persuasion and generosity.

We are in a spiritual battle here in Houghton Lake. This week nearly 400 people filled this sanctuary to mourn the tragic death of Correy Syzska. Most of them were very young and when it came time in the service to pray the Lord’s Prayer, few of those present knew the words. Here they all were on the knife edge of despair and spiritual darkness and they did not know how to pray!

If we knew that 300 of our young people were trapped out on an ice flow on Houghton Lake right now, would we not sound the alarms? Would we not mount up an all night prayer vigil for their deliverance? Yet, there are 300 young people within shouting distance of our doors this morning who are without hope and without God. No one has told them how to pray or what to believe. We must join the battle!

I don’t want to see another life taken by despair. I don’t want to see another life burned up with alcohol and porn. I don’t want to see another life descend into aimless boredom. It’s time to take the field. It’s time to go up against the gates of hell.

The letter R stands for *Resources*: the resources given to us by Jesus consist of a set of keys. Matthew 16:19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” What are

these keys that open heaven? One is the word of God proclaimed to the people. 1 Peter 1:23 says it, "...you have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God." When we preach God's plan of salvation in Christ, we are opening the doors of heaven. We are playing spiritual midwives to human souls being spiritually reborn. "I am not ashamed of the gospel," said Paul, "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16) This power has not been given to the State of Michigan. It has not been given to County Mental Health. The police don't have it, the courts don't have it, the lawyers and educators don't have it. The church alone possesses this spiritual capital. It is ours to mothball in the back of the furnace room with the old Christmas decorations from 1972, or it is ours to give away.

The letter C stands for two words: *Catholic* and *Communion* of saints. Here's the dictionary definition of catholic: "universal in extent, involving all; of interest to all." If someone asks you how many churches there are in the world, here's the answer: *one*. The church is like a tree. It is rooted firmly in Jesus Christ and the teaching of the Apostles. For a thousand years the trunk grew straight and tall. Then in 1054 the Eastern and Western branches diverged from one another over issues of church government. Then in 1517 the Western branch gave birth to a third limb of the Protestant reformation. The Protestant limb breaks down into many branches: Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Independent. But there is still only one tree with the same life force in all the branches: Jesus. In a word, the church is catholic.

The communion of saints points to a unity and a bond between Christians that transcends both space and time. Though Peter is long dead, he is one of us. Though the Methodist Church in Haiti is 3000 miles away, we are one with them.

Finally, the letter H is for the *Holiness* of the church. Peter said, "...do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do." (1 Peter 1:14-15) In a word, holiness is love. But love is not a feeling, it is a specific way of living toward God and others. The Bible says in Micah 6:8, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." The church is holy, not because it is perfect but because our leader is and he has asked us to teach holiness and strive for holiness in the forms of justice, mercy and humility before God.