

On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand
Week 4 *You Call This a Plan?*
Matthew 5:14 – 16 Matthew 16:17-18
January 28, 2018 Pastor Roger Barkley

There's an apocryphal story in which Jesus ascends to Heaven and excitedly tells the angels all about his life on earth.

He's beaming as he tells about the sick and broken hearted who flocked to him, about how he taught love for all people, and about how he chose to face suffering and crucifixion rather than abandon them.

The archangel Michael thinks this over and then asks, "But what are they going to do now without you?"

Jesus answers, "Well, I left behind a small group of people whom I asked to go about telling others about my love and sacrifice.

"I left them to heal the sick, care for the poor and do all the things I did while I was with them. I call it my church."

Michael looks confused.

He recalls how weak and confused Jesus said those people are, and then he asks, "But Master, what if this plan of yours doesn't work? What then?"

Jesus just stares at him for a moment and then answers, "I have no other plan."

We are in the midst of a six-week study of the UCC *Statement of Faith*.

We talked about God the Father, who creates us, gives us rules for life and then reigns over and above us;

... the Son, who came as God in human flesh to redeem us and to walk beside us, to show in human terms who God is and how we are designed to live;

... and the Holy Spirit, who came to us intimately, residing within us and transforming us from the inside out.

Today we look at the church, Christ's spiritual body – how God comes *to* us and acts *through* us.

Jesus has both charged us and empowered us to do in his spiritual body – the church - what he did while he was in his physical body.

UCC Statement of Faith: "... Christ calls us into His church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be God's servants in the service of people, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at His table, to join Him in His passion and victory."

Frankly, you've got to wonder what Jesus was thinking when he turned to Peter and said,

Matthew 16:18: And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

I mean, Peter, a rock? Really?

Clueless Peter, the one who chronically misunderstood Jesus' teaching?

Cynical Peter, the one who tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem?

Cowardly Peter, the one who stood in the courtyard listening to Jesus' trial while denying him three times?

That's the plan?

Look at us: we're so expansive with energy that even the gates of hell cannot keep us out?

We're Jesus' plan for bringing hope to the world?

But, as imperfect as we may be, the Bible assures us that Christ loves his church.

Ephesians 5:25 ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

Let's look at how.

First, he calls each of us personally to this community of faith.

It is no accident that you are here.

John 10:3 ... *he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out.*

Jesus called you by name – maybe he used a problem, a discontent, a search for meaning to reach you to lead you here.

We all know that there are dozens and dozens of other churches you could have chosen – some with bigger programs and better-looking pastors.

But *this* is the church you were drawn to, and this is how Jesus wants to love you.

You know what I find re-assuring?

Jesus is not counting on mountaintop visions or dramatic inner-revelations to reach us.

Those experiences are far and few between.

Rather, Jesus wants to love you and grow you through worship in this room, through the hugs and support and prayers of these people, through sermons, Bible study, and your team.

About 60% of churches in America have weekly attendance of fewer than 100 people.

Those churches tend to have people who maintain church participation the longest and so grow closer as a community that sees one another through thick and thin and through many years of shared life.

This is a church where each of us can be loved for who we authentically are.

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times: "If you knew my secret, if you knew how I lose my temper with my kids, how many times I've fallen off my diet or lost my sobriety, my threadbare faith . . . well I think I've disappointed God and the church too many times."

If you think that, then realize that Jesus did not choose an angel to build his church.

He chose Peter, and that is good news for every one of us who feels we don't measure up.

Peter is not a model of morality, but a mirror of identity.

We are the sometimes-confused, sometimes-cynical, sometimes-cowardly Peter.

The second reason Jesus calls us to his church is to remind us of God's presence in our lives.

Psalm 16:11 *You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

Eugene Peterson is famous for the *Message* translation of the Bible.

He's also written books for pastors on the nature of church and ministry, from which I made the responsive reading today.

Here's the beginning of what we read:

"The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world... In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called Pastor and is given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God...."

The more I know about God's values and priorities, the more I know about the kind of life God designed me for.

The more I remember that God is a constant presence throughout my life, the more faith, courage and peace I have through all the ups and downs, successes and challenges I face.

Whatever I face, I can ask, “What’s God up to in this situation, and how do I get on board?”

God’s got my back ... something we all need to be reminded of every day.

Charles Plumb was a jet fighter pilot in Vietnam who, after 75 combat missions, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile.

He parachuted to safely into enemy hands, where he spent six years in a Communist prison.

Many years later, Plumb and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, when a man from another table came up and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down and survived!”

“How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb.

“I packed your parachute,” the man replied.

Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude.

Plumb assured him, “If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man.

Plumb asks, “I wondered how many times I passed him on the Kitty Hawk and not even said, ‘Good morning, how are you,’ because, you see, I was a fighter pilot all full of myself.”

Plumb thought of the many hours the sailor had spent behind the scenes carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding the fate of each of us in his hands.

Now a public speaker, Plumb asks his audience, “Do you know who’s packing your parachute?”

Part of why we come together each Sunday is to be reminded who holds our lives in His hands.

When we know that, we go through challenges with confidence and peace because we see how God can use everything for His purposes.

Third, Jesus formed his church to be the light of the world.

Just like we feel *we've* personally fallen short, a quick look at the average *church* may make us wonder if it could really be Jesus' unlikely plan for them to be the light of the world.

But it is because of the changed hearts and changed lives that its people take into their worlds that show the church's light.

Just as God has a plan for you, He has a plan for this community.

Maybe you've heard people say they don't come to church because its full of hypocrites.

Could it be? Yes! It's true . . . and worse . . . and that is great!

Jesus said, Matthew 5:14 *You are the light of the world.*

Think about this:

What is the first thing that happens when you turn on your patio light?

It attracts bugs!

A church that is acting like the light of the world is going to attract the bugs of the world.

Do you realize that the church is about the only place on earth where you can come and be welcomed and loved – regardless of who you are?

Low on money? – we love you.

Low on self-esteem? – we love you.

Overweight, underweight, over-the-hill, depressed, discouraged, addicted? – we love you.

God loves you just as you are, but too much to leave you that way because we aren't a sanctuary for saints but a hospital for sinners.

During the chaotic first century, there were many movements trying to make people acceptable to God.

Many believed that meant they had to become pure and holy.

The Essenes took the logic of the time to an extreme.

They would not admit anyone to their community who showed any blemish in their life: They had to be of perfect health and perfect moral standing, and then they had insanely detailed rules regimenting every minute of life.

But look at what God did:

Rather than demanding purity and perfection, God put on flesh and came through Jesus and then sought out rejects of society – the poor, the diseased, the prostitutes, the crazed – and showed them God's compassion and taught them to love.

No one is so bad they can't be here, and no one is so good they don't need to be here.

Which brings us to the fourth reason for being a church: Jesus is counting on his church.

1 Peter 4:10 God has given each of you some special abilities; be sure to use them to help each other, passing on to others God's many kind blessings.

The world is full of need, so God has given each of us a special passion as well as special gifts to serve somewhere, somehow.

When we make ourselves available, God will use us.

Discipleship results in being Christ's presence in our particular time and situation with our particular passions and gifts.

Galatians 5:26... we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

Jesus can't get to all the orphanages, prisons and soup kitchens.

Jesus can't be with all the isolated elderly people.

So, he sends his church.

Jesus does not measure a church by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity.

Tony Campolo's organization runs a school and orphanage in Haiti.

Because of poverty, political repression and AIDs, the needs of children in Haiti are staggering: Children beg on the streets, sleep in doorways and are chronically ill with no medical care.

So Campolo's group raised money to expand and to take in these street kids.

When the big day arrived and the annex was completed, Tony and others went to the village in a bus to pick them up.

They had expected 50 kids from this single village, but 300 showed up.

Tony says they had rust-colored malnourished hair and bloated stomachs.

I don't know how anyone could do this, but Tony had to pick 50 to live out of the 300.

He recounts, "You can't pick 50 to live without choosing 250 to die."

He stayed behind and tried to cheer up the remaining 250.

Told them stories, tried to encourage them.

He got them to sing.

They started singing, “God is so good. He loves me so, God is so good to me.”

But he says, something inside him just screamed, “God you’re not so good. You’re letting these kids die.”

And he says that in that moment he heard a response: “I am good and I do care and you know why this is happening.

“God in His care and His love has given the church the resources to meet the needs of the world . . . it only means that the church of Jesus Christ is holding back.”

But how can one church make a difference?

Another man working through Campolo’s group wanted to help people overcome poverty, but he was not rich enough to fund anything significant.

But after prayer and counsel from his church he realized that he did have organizational and teaching skills.

So, he networked, got ideas and some resources and from there started training people in third world countries about how to start small businesses and cottage industries.

He went to the most destitute of the world, and within ten years they created 843 businesses that generated 33,000 jobs.

That is the power of super-powered churches.

One guy + Christ + ten years = 33,000 saved families

That is what Christ will do when we let him use us fully.

Jesus said to the archangel Michael, “I have no other plan. But I trust those people in my church.”