

July 3rd, 2022

Matthew 16:13-21 “Lord and Savior of the World”

Fair warning – I am unchained from the lectionary for the next seven weeks. Back in April when I was at Annual Gathering in Sacramento, I was inspired to preach a series on what it means to be a part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I think it’s good to let people know who we are and what we do from time to time. So, I’ve taken this affirmation of faith that we read together as our call to worship and broke it down into seven sections. Hopefully by August 21st, you’ll have a better idea of who we are as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) But first, I’ve got to give you a brief history of how we came into being.

Our church, as a movement, came together in the early 19th century in and around Kentucky, West Virginia, and western Pennsylvania. Historians consider us the first American-born Protestant denomination. All other Protestant denominations that existed in the United States up until then were European imports. You might be saying, “Oh, come on now ... what about the Baptists? You don’t get more ‘American’ than the Baptists.” Nope. The Baptists started in Holland in the early 1600s. Okay, what about the Methodists? Nope. England, mid-1700s. Our founders were renegade Scottish Presbyterian immigrants who believed that denominations on the American frontier spent way too much time and energy competing for members rather than proclaiming the good news of Jesus. In August of 1801, a Presbyterian Church in Cane Ridge, Kentucky hosted a revival meeting where somewhere between 10,000 – 20,000 people attended over the course of 6 days. This revival was where the inspiration and framework for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) started. Barton Stone, one of those renegade Scottish Presbyterian preachers started advocating for Christian unity at the revival. He said we need to bring Christians together instead of continuing to split apart. Meanwhile, Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander were leading a similar reform movement called the Disciples of Christ over in western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. When Barton

Stone met the Campbells, they all agreed that they were preaching the same core message. In 1832 the Christians of Kentucky and the Disciples of Pennsylvania formally merged in Lexington, Kentucky to become the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Like many good movements throughout history, our founders wanted to keep things simple. They said, “Let’s just focus on what we have in common as Christians and set aside the things that divide us.” In other words, let’s not get bogged down by the small stuff. They determined that the most important components of their faith and practice were baptism by immersion in water, weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, the priority of scripture, specifically the New Testament and the unity of all Christians. For Christians to be united, though, we need to set aside creeds which are statements of belief that highlight specific doctrines that distinguish one set of Christians from another. Our founders believed that creeds were created to divide rather than unite the church, so we became known for our little “keep it simple” identity statements. We’d say, “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no law but love.” Another saying was, “Where the scriptures speak, we speak, where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” And of course, there’s, “The church of Jesus Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.” These statements helped us to create an identity unlike “sectarian” churches, or churches who thought theirs was the only valid way to be the church.

So how long do you think this unity movement lasted? Remember, good intentioned human beings always want to start out by keeping things simple, but we always fail. Well ... we managed to keep our act together for 74 years until we split in 1906 and again in 1969. As of now, there are three distinct groups that came out of the original movement. We have the Churches of Christ non-instrumental, also known as the “Christian unity can be achieved, but only if you do it our way” movement. Then there’s the Independent Christian Churches, otherwise known as the “Barton who? Thomas and Alexander what?” movement. And then there’s us ... the Christian Church (Disciples of

Christ), or if you prefer the “Now wait, what are we doing again?” movement. See, it’s good to self-critique. It keeps us honest. We are, after all, flawed human beings and we need to own up to that.

So here’s what happened during this last split in 1969. Leaders in the movement said, “We’re too scattered and disorganized. We can’t seem to get anything done. Missionaries get stranded out on the field when their congregations can’t support them anymore. We have unscrupulous clergy who wreak havoc in a church on the east coast, then they just go to the west coast where people don’t know them and mess things up again. We need to have some kind of cooperative structure to help make our congregations stronger. It can’t be a top-down system with bishops and arch-bishops and diocese because it’s important that every congregation is able to determine the best way to govern itself.” In other words, we can’t be just another denomination. We’re a unity movement.

So we designed a structure where there are three expressions of the church – The most important is the local church ... our congregations. They’re responsible for governing themselves, calling their own clergy and setting their own mission priorities. Then there’s the regional expression of the church. Their responsibility is to resource those congregations so they can carry out their mission priorities. Regions provide camps, men’s and women’s ministries, congregational support, and staff to help congregations call ministers and train leaders. Then there’s the general expression of the church that helps us all stay in touch with what’s going on outside our little geographical clusters like global missions, building partnerships with other churches, providing disaster relief, higher education opportunities and financial services for congregations. It was called *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*. “Yeah, but that sounds like a denomination.” Shhh let’s not go there yet. “Yeah, but you all came up with a logo.” Okay, fine. We sort of became a denomination just when denominations started to collapse. We were late to the party. We own it. Let’s move on.

So what we read this morning was the preamble to the *Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*. And yes, I am aware that it sounds an awful lot like a creed, but it isn't. Creeds are very specific statements meant to establish doctrinal distinctiveness. They were designed to separate the heretics from the orthodox. The preamble to our design was meant to be broad and inclusive, not narrow and exclusive. It was created to show how much we have in common with other Christian communities, not to highlight the little doctrinal nuggets that we think everyone else gets wrong.

The phrase I want to focus on this morning is the first line of the preamble: "As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world." Most creeds start out with "We believe" or "I believe" and then go on to explain specific aspects of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Our* affirmation of faith starts out with "We *confess*." What's the difference? Belief is just an acknowledgement that we affirm the existence of something or someone. Confession is declaring what you believe to be true and giving evidence to what you know in your heart. That's what this morning's scripture is about. Peter *confessed* that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the Living God. In our affirmation of faith, the most important thing isn't what we *believe* about God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. What's important is that, like Peter, we *confess* that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God. And how do we give evidence to this confession? By proclaiming him "Lord and Savior of the world." So, Jesus came to *save* the world? Yes. Now you know why I had Fred Craddock preach last week ... so you all could get your heads wrapped around what being "saved" is all about.

Everything we are and everything we do *starts* with this confession of faith in Christ. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do others say the son of man is?" They said, "Well ... John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah. Maybe one of the other prophets." Jesus said, "Yeah, but who do *you* say I am?" Simon Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son

of the Living God.” Jesus said, “Bingo. And flesh and blood didn’t reveal this to you, Peter, God did. You are my rock and it’s on this solid foundation that I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Our confession of faith does not begin with mere knowledge. It begins with who we are in relationship to Jesus.

I’ve said this before, but it bears repeating. “Lord and Savior of the World” was one of the many titles that belonged to Caesar. To say that anyone else but Caesar was “Lord and Savior” was to declare yourself an enemy of the Roman Empire. Tomorrow, we commemorate the 246th year of our nation’s independence from the British Empire. We are fortunate that we do not live in a dictatorial empire where exercising free speech could either send you to prison or even get you killed like it was during the first and second century in Rome. Granted, I haven’t checked my newsfeed since about 6:30 this morning, but I think we’re still good for now. As followers of Christ, we can say, “Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world” and others have the liberty to either say, “Right on, I’m with you” or “No way, I don’t believe that.” Freedom, liberty, autonomy, and a right to express our dissent are part of the DNA that is woven into our country’s design. One of our Disciples of Christ historians once wrote that it’s no surprise that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was the first American-born Protestant denomination because our movement values the liberty, autonomy and freedom we have in Christ. As our founders used to say, “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” But honestly, it doesn’t matter *where* our movement was born. We are who we are by God’s grace. “As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.”

Remember that our confession ... our belief set into motion ... is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and Savior of the world. That is our first priority. Not our allegiance to any nation or state of flag. Not conformation to any political ideology. Not our adherence to any

religious creed. None of those things will save us. It is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God who saves us. Amen.