

August 21st, 2022

## Matthew 13:18-23 “Whose Kingdom Has No End”

Finally! We have reached the end of this eight-week study on our Disciples Affirmation of Faith. Don't worry, I'm not going to give you a pop quiz. That would be awkward. But by now you should know that our affirmation of faith is not a creed. By now you know that it is not a statement of *belief* created to test our orthodoxy. By now you know that it was created to celebrate what Christians have in common rather than identifying what separates us. By now you know we *confess* that Jesus is the Christ. We *rejoice* in God. We are joined together *in communion with* the Holy Spirit. Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Ministry of All Believers are the three most important sacraments in our movement. We proclaim that we are not the only Christians but Christians only and that we are a part of the Church Universal and that we have the light of scripture to guide us. What else is there to know? What else is there to say about us that hasn't already been said? Our eighth and final stanza is, “In the bonds of Christian faith, we yield ourselves to God that we may serve the One whose kingdom has no end.”

I hope that one of the things you've taken away from this series thus far is that we are a *movement*, not just a

denomination. We *move forward* and try not to get stuck doing the “same ol’ same ol’.” Yes, we affirm with confidence what the author of the book of Hebrews writes in chapter 13 verse 8 – “*Jesus Christ* is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” What we try not to do is misinterpret that verse to say, “*The church* is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” As Bob Dylan once wrote, “the times they are a changing.” In the same way that the early church in Biblical times had to change and adapt to different cultures and situations, we as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have had to move forward and adapt as we continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus in an ever-changing world.

Something we touched on last week is how we’ve developed an understanding of what it means to be part of God’s reign on Earth. We’ve moved away from this idea that somehow we can change God’s timetable or agenda in order to hasten Christ’s return. Our biggest realization was, “we can’t!” We cannot say, “This is taking too long! What can we do to speed things up?” In all of history, that has *never* worked out. In fact, it has only led to disaster. Thankfully, we’ve come to a better understanding of God’s timetable rather than relying only on what we think it should be. Maybe we aren’t the harbingers of Christ’s return in the way our founders thought. Maybe we’ve spent too much time and effort wondering when Christ will return to take us away to

God's kingdom. But by the light of scripture and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we *have* learned that Jesus always talked about the Kingdom of God being here among us. The author of Revelation affirms that in the end, "the home of God is among mortals." As a movement we've concluded that our work and mission should reflect what needs to be done here on this earth instead of spending all our time and attention longing for another earth. In this part of our affirmation of faith, we acknowledge that God's kingdom has no end. So then what are we to do? What is our response? We say, "In the bonds of Christian faith, we yield ourselves to God."

What does it mean to be "bonded?" Scientists bond chemicals to make compounds. People in the financial industry speak of "bonded debt." When someone wants to make bail to avoid going to jail before their court date, they take out a bail bond to increase the likelihood that they'll show up in order to get their money back. If they skip bail, the bail bondsman, otherwise known as a bounty hunter, tracks them down and ... encourages them to get back on track. Those are strange examples that probably aren't very helpful. However, we also speak of bonds that form between a parent and a child or a romantic partner or a friend or a community. That's the kind of bond we're talking about here. Through common faith we who follow Christ are bonded together or "bound together" in love for God and love for one another. We

are *not* bound together by “correct doctrine,” or worship style, or socio-economic political preference, or any flag, or any race, or gender identity, or age. We are bound together by a *common faith*. In the same way someone makes a promise to another by saying, “My word is my bond,” we are bound together through our faith in Christ.

Is this easy? Oh, good grief no. But it’s what we are called to do, and it is one of the objectives we work towards in our movement. How do we do it then? Well, we *yield* ourselves to God. Or to borrow an image from the author of John’s gospel, “We must decrease so that God may increase.” Or to put it yet another way, we need to get out of God’s way, especially when we insist on doing things *our* way. We are like the sower in the parable that Max read earlier from Matthew’s gospel. We are the seed-caster. We are not responsible for where the seeds land and we are not responsible for the outcome as it relates to whether the seeds take root or whether they bear fruit or not. We yield to God, and we simply proclaim the gospel message in word and deed and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

I hope you all understand that the reason I did this series wasn’t because I thought we were “perfect” in any way or even that we’re “better” than other churches or church movements. As I’ve mentioned throughout the series, we have our strengths and deficits for sure. We, as members

of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) worldwide are highly involved in what folks refer to as the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism simply means working towards Christian unity. It's one of the pillars of our movement. As one of our founders Barton Stone said, "Let unity be our polar star!" We are quite talented when it comes to finding ways to bring Christians together worldwide. In fact, if I may brag a little, we are often the leaders in that effort even though we are a relatively small denomination compared to others. John McGarvey, Kenneth Teegarden, Michael Kinnamon, Dick Hamm and other Disciples have been instrumental in the world-wide ecumenical movement. We are members of and leaders in the World Communion on Reformed Churches, the Global Christian Forum, the World Council of Churches, Churches Uniting in Christ, and the World Council of Churches of Christ. Over the years we have become full ecumenical partners with the United Church of Christ. Our own Georgeanne Bennett is ordained in the UCC but she, if she chooses, can serve as clergy in UCC congregations *and* Disciples congregations. Jerry Hambleton has what's called "dual standing." He not only can serve Disciples and UCC churches, he has access to both church's search and call systems, can serve as a voting delegate in both denomination's General Assemblies, and is listed in both the UCC and DOC Yearbooks.

We are also leaders in the church's efforts to become "anti-racist/pro-reconciliation." Some of our "celebrity preachers" ... preachers who have preached at televised presidential prayer breakfasts ... preachers like William J. Barber II, Sharon Watkins, Cynthia Hale and others are out there making progress for racial reconciliation. We're also out there on the front lines when it comes to supporting other marginalized peoples like the LGBTQ community and immigrants.

We're not so good at "getting our message out there." We have often been called "the best kept secret among churches." Authors, historians, theologians, and other nationally recognized spokespeople for the Christian faith like Diana Butler Bass, Philip Gulley, Rob Bell, Jim Wallis, and Brian McLaren, have all, upon learning about us have said, "Where have you all been?" Our Regional Minister LaTaunya Bynum does *not* like this label "best kept secret." She believes we should be out there on the front lines sharing the good news and making ourselves known. But we often speak with a "passive voice" in our efforts to find common ground with other denominations and with each other. We want people to get along. This volatile polarized mess that we're living in now is driving us batty. We don't like seeing the world in black and white and we will go out of our way to try to find the middle ground in *everything*. In a lot of situations, this is admirable, but when it comes to calling out evil and

injustice and speaking prophetically? Well, with a few exceptions that I've already mentioned ... that's not always our forte. Our "neutrality" is often criticized. Or as Austin Walker used to say, "We're so non-judgy that we're judged for being non-judgy."

But as I have pointed out throughout this series, we have been known to change our minds and our ways after much prayer and thoughtful consideration. We aren't afraid to stop and say, "What if we're wrong about this particular issue?" Or "Have we checked our privilege or checked our prejudices? Have we searched deeply enough throughout the scriptures in order to come to a biblically based and Holy Spirit inspired conclusion?"

Fair warning though, *don't* try to shame us into changing our minds. Oh my word, we will shut you out so quickly your head will spin. If you're a church that's, let's say of the more "judgy" persuasion, we will flat out brag about how you don't like us and will consider your disapproval as a badge of honor. We're a little bit arrogant that way, but again ... we're still working through our issues.

We are the Disciples of Christ. A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. Our vision is to be a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian

spirituality and a passion for justice. Our Mission is to be and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving and serving from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.

It's kind of small so you may not always see it, but this is our congregation's mission statement that was written maybe twenty-five or thirty years ago. It hangs just to the left of the double doors on the way out of the front exit of the sanctuary. It's there to remind us about who we are as an individual congregation within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). "Chico First Christian Church is an inclusive, loving community of believers in Jesus Christ who strive to follow his teachings putting faith into action." May this be so.