

**Pentecost 12A + August 27, 2017**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**  
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI  
Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Simon Peter has just had a big breakthrough. Finally, he has acknowledged Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. In return Jesus gives Peter his identity as leader of the apostles and their mission to make disciples of all nations. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

What has become of that mission today? In mainstream Protestantism, the numbers of those who regularly attend church are shrinking rapidly. The largest decline concerns those between the ages of 30 and 49. They are going somewhere—either to non-denominational churches or into the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones," that now make up nearly a quarter of the U.S. adult population. And they are taking their children with them.

It's not that people generally have less need to know God, or to know whether there is a God. Something else is going on. Is the church as we have known it for generations worn out—its hierarchy, its rules, its requirements, its building?

One current theory is that every 500 years or so the church goes through a kind of rummage sale, in which old forms of spirituality are cleaned out and replaced with new ones. Around 500 AD the rummage sale took place in the ashes of the Roman Empire, which led to the birth of monasticism. Around 1000 AD it was the Great Schism, which led the church to split into what is now Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Exactly 500 years ago it was the Reformation, which rejected papal authority, put the Bible into the hands of the people, and launched the priesthood of all believers.

But this doesn't tell us *why* the church is undergoing an upheaval here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or why all the church's stuff should have to be laid out on a rummage table. ELW Setting 4, better known as old LBW Setting 2? The Apostles' Creed? The Sacrament of Baptism? The Lutheran Confessions? A Mighty Fortress? What of substance could take their place?

I wonder whether the question is wrong. Perhaps it's not why the church has to divest itself of Biblical, poetic, and musical content that keeps it connected to the Christian church across the ages. The question is, what's keeping people away?

All this came to mind when I was about verse 18 in today's Gospel lesson, famous in church history for being used to establish the doctrine of papal authority: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

I wonder whether we could attribute at least some aspect of the church's decline to the close association of the two words "build" and "church." Of course, Jesus isn't using "build" in a literal sense of a hammer and nails. He is referring to movement that has already begun and which will accelerate under Peter's leadership, the story told by the Book of Acts.

But for a long time now, the words "church" and "building" have been synonymous. For countless worshipers, the church *is* the building. Can it be that the association of faith with four walls has made organized religion so spiritually inflexible that it may soon be dismissed as a relic of another age?

It's possible that the problem is with those four walls. The truth is, there are no good walls where either the human spirit or the Holy Spirit are concerned. In this sense, walls serve only as instruments of division. Walls separate our church bodies from each other. Jesus certainly never envisioned all these denominations, much less the sad divisions within groups such as the Lutheran

church suffers from. Walls in worship keep out the messiness of life with all its intrusions, surprises, wonders, and amazing graces.

Think of how people go to church. They drive up, park outside a building, and enter through doors that shut behind them. There's probably a second set of doors inside. At the appointed hour, those doors are also closed. The business of the church is then carried out far removed from world that people inhabit for the other 167 hours of their week.

Doesn't this seem like a huge problem? In our Romans reading today Paul urges us not to be conformed *to* the world—that is, to sinful behaviors and practices that still run rampant. However, we are still *in* the world, all the faithful who have been transformed by the renewing of their minds and who are able to discern God's will. We are not of the world, but we are in the world. This is where the communities of faith must think of themselves as primarily located—not in a building, but out in the world.

Here at Atonement this may be challenge, because we have such a beautiful, strong, sturdy building of which we are very proud. But our life, and the life of the church as a whole, depends on us getting outside these four walls bodily and spiritually.

Take a few moments of silence now to ponder what our identity is, apart from our church building. Who are the people of Atonement, without these walls, without this building?

For my part, I would say this is a loving, caring community. You cherish opportunities to have your faith strengthened and your hope renewed through worship, song, prayer, and fellowship. You are friendly, welcoming, and accepting of difference. You are passionate about justice and have great compassion for those in need. You are confident in your faith and are not afraid to share that with others.

Those are great qualities. I wish more people could experience them. How can we get past the limitations of these four walls so others can share this joy, and learn about Jesus from you?

Here is one idea. On September 13 we are starting a new worship service Wednesdays at 6 p.m. It's a risk, but we have little to lose and the possibility of much to gain. I am actually trying not to use the words "worship," "service," or "church" in talking about this, so I'm calling it "Reconnecting With Christ," and thinking of it as geared toward families and a come-as-you-are attitude. We'll share a light supper of soup and bread beforehand. I'm don't even know yet exactly how this is going to work, but I feel we've got to try.

The purpose is to get to know our neighbors and others in the community who might stop by. We'll be singing familiar music in an up-tempo style. There will be a Scripture reading and a brief message, I'm hoping from a variety of people. In fact, Phyllis' grandson Travis is giving the message on September 20. We have a grant from the Synod to assemble a small group of musicians, probably on a rotating basis. We'll pray together and share communion.

But most of all we'll be getting to know people we wouldn't have met otherwise, and they'll be getting to know us. We'll have this outdoors as long as the weather permits. By next Sunday there will be publicity cards you can take and hand out to let people know about all the things we are doing here, including Bo's art classes starting in two weeks.

I am invigorated when I think of a church that is not limited by walls, just like the one Jesus made Peter the head of. The great hymn we are about to sing expands on the idea that God does not dwell in temples made by human hands but in the temple of heaven, and how Christ dwells in our hearts. That is where we find the true church.

Amen.