



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 1, 2016 - Matthew 16:13-20

"Upon Which Rock?" (Encounters With Jesus Series)

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

I taught surfing in Santa Cruz, California one summer when I was about 23 years old. I may have told you about this amazing episode in my life already. But after graduating from college I spent the summer working with senior high school students at Ponderosa Lodge, which is a part of Mount Hermon Christian Conference Center. Mount Hermon is not far from that beach up in the Santa Cruz Mountains of Northern California. I loved working with senior high school students. Many of the things I learned that summer have continued to shape the way I do ministry to this day.

When I arrived for a week of staff orientation and training, I was amazed to discover that every third week I was scheduled to spend my mornings and afternoons on the beach, teaching high school students how to surf. When compared to washing dishes or cleaning toilets this was the best assignment anyone could get.

There was only one problem with this plan. I had never stood up on a surfboard in my life. In fact, I had never successfully paddled a surfboard that was smaller than a canoe. My only apparent qualification for the position was that I attended high school in Newport Beach, California and college at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The

simple, unadorned truth was that I did not know how to surf. Someone had made a huge leap when making staffing decisions, at least in my case.

On the first night of staff orientation I pulled one of the Mount Hermon staff members aside and told him, "Hey, thanks for the great rotation assignment but I've got to tell you there's just one problem...I don't know how to surf." He stared at me straight in the eye and without missing a beat said, "We think you can do it."

That was all he said. No attempt was made to understand my fears or concerns. The conversation was over. The staff was confident that I could do it. I was a Ponderosa Lodge surf instructor.

During my first week of counselor training I made every attempt to pull together everything I had ever heard from my brother, my friends, my roommates who were surfers. I got ready to put what little knowledge I had about surfing to work.

What stunned me was that throughout the summer senior high school students, by the grace of God, actually learned how to surf. No one got killed. No one experienced even what could be described as a really bad sunburn!

One week, towards the end of August, the pressure of my lie got to me and I blurted out a confession to a carload of students, most of who had just stood up on a surfboard for the very first time. "I've got to tell you guys the truth, I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to surf." Not a single one of them believed me.

That story is a snapshot of my experience working three summers at Mount Hermon. The people I worked with and for believed in me more than I believed in myself. They saw in me skills and abilities far beyond those of a surfing instructor. They looked deeply into my life and recognized and affirmed what God was doing in me. They were able to see what I could not see in myself or even dared to believe.

In that atmosphere of encouragement, grace and support, I began to grow into a stronger minister of Jesus Christ. My mentors spoke words of affirmation and confidence into my life. They gave me feedback about my spiritual gifts and God-given abilities for ministry. They trusted God and the work God was doing in me so much more than I did or could. They helped me understand more about this amazing God I was called to serve; the One who had begun a good work in me that He is going to complete.

Every time someone gave me one of those affirmations it was an event in my life that had a transforming impact deep inside me. One generation was empowering another. They were inviting a young man to take his place of leadership in the ministry of Jesus Christ. My appetite for those blessings was enormous.

In our scripture this morning from Matthew chapter 16, Jesus takes His disciples on a little retreat and one of the goals He has for them is to tell them who they are and what He is calling them to be and do in the world. He's going to set in front of his disciples a very big, even terrifying challenge. Jesus has confidence that they will be able to face that challenge. He is going to challenge His disciples to be agents of change in the world.

My surf instructing days took place at a conference center in Northern California called Mount Hermon. Jesus challenged His first disciples about what it will mean to be the church while they were at a retreat center, located on the southwest foot of another place called Mount Hermon. Here's what people do now on top of that 10,000-foot mountain during the winter.

One of the three tributaries that flow into the Jordan River has its headwaters at the base of that Mount Hermon. That tributary has its source in the Baniyas Spring. In 2 B.C. Herod Philip constructed a city near the site of that spring and called it Caesarea Philippi. This almost entirely non-Jewish community, situated at the northernmost border of the nation of Israel, was literally on the boundary between Israel and the rest of the world. For a significant period of time, the Baniyas Spring had served as a center of pagan worship. There is evidence that the

worship of Baal, the Old Testament pagan god, took place there.

By Jesus' day, the Greeks and Romans had stopped the worship of Baal. However, Herod Philip built a worship center for the shepherd's god Pan, the Greek god of fertility. They believed that Pan was born inside a cave in the massive rock wall from which the Baniyas Spring flows. They believed that cave was the doorway to the underworld.

So the Greeks carved images of their fertility god into the face of this imposing rock. They made the place a pagan shrine and people came there to worship their god often by having an orgy. It was to this retreat center that Jesus brought His disciples to talk to them about what it would mean for them to be His church.

If you think that following Jesus means staying safe and secure, you'd be wrong about that. If you think being a disciple of Jesus means insulating yourself from the brokenness and evil in the world, you'd be wrong about that as well. Jesus took His disciples on a long, two-day journey from the Sea of Galilee, to Caesarea Philippi, to a place where people worshipped a false god who was the god of fertility! He takes them there to give them a quiz and to tell them who they are to be in the world.

The scene recorded in Matthew chapter 16 takes place towards the end of Jesus' three-year ministry. It's graduation day for His disciples, so He gives them a pop quiz. Without warning, He asks His disciples two questions. Question one is the easier of the two.

Jesus turned to them and asked, "Who do people say the

Son of Man is?" "Son of Man" is one of the ways He referred to Himself. It's a messianic term from the Old Testament. So every time He uses that term, He's dropping a big hint as to who He is.

It seems from the text that many of His disciples had an answer to His first question. One after another they chimed in with a response. Some said that people thought He might be Elijah, or even John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Others thought He could be Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets. So, let me give you the same quiz Jesus gave His first disciples. Turn to your neighbor, introduce yourself to them if you don't know one another, and tell them what you've heard people say about Jesus today. Who do people say that Jesus is?

Jesus' first question is fairly easy to answer. Jesus had stirred up tons of controversy wherever He went. People had opinions about what He said, what He did and did not do and certainly about whom He was. The disciples had heard all of that. They'd been in numerous conversations, discussions and debates with both His supporters and His detractors. The first question, which is the easier of the two, was about what other people think.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" That's His first question. That's the warm-up question. Question two was the real test. Jesus now asks His disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

To those who had been with Him for three years and to each one of us He asks, "But who do YOU say that I am?" I want you to think about that question. Who do you say Jesus is?

I am not going to ask you to share your answer with someone sitting next to you. But I want you to honestly think about that question. Who do you think Jesus is? I want to encourage you to come up with three things you really believe about Jesus. Write them down. Make a mental note of those three things. Who do you think Jesus is?

So, what happened when Jesus asked His disciples that question? The text implies that Peter immediately spoke up. But did it really happen that way? It could have. Peter regularly spoke up and shared his opinions.

“Who do you say that I am?” Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century’s most influential theologians wrote: “Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I will tell you who you are.” Your Christology is a fancy theological word that simply refers to what you believe about Jesus. What the disciples say in response to Jesus’ question will reveal, not only their understanding of who He is, it will speak volumes about what they now understand about who they are, about their own need for a Savior and their understanding of how greatly God loves them.

A deafening silence might have greeted Jesus as he waited for an answer to His second question. It’s far more difficult to answer honestly and truly this deeply personal question than it is to enter a debate about what other people are saying of Jesus. I’m not asking you what you’ve been told about Jesus. I’m not asking a fill in the blank question. I’m not asking this question so you’ll give me the correct Sunday school answer. I’m asking what you really believe and know to be true about who Jesus is.

Peter speaks up, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus tells Peter that he’s had help from heaven with that answer. Peter confesses his faith in Jesus and so becomes the first Christian.

Jesus brought His disciples to a pagan retreat center to have a conversation with His disciples about two crucial topics. What do His followers really believe about who He is? And based on their answer to that question, Jesus then talks to them about who they are to be as a community, as a church living their lives together in a hostile world.

Before He turned towards Jerusalem, where He would be put to death on the cross, Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi. It might have raised some concerns and even some eyebrows among the Jews. Even those who were followers of Christ might have been scandalized by the fact that Jesus led his followers to a pagan center of worship.

In sight of the shrine to the pagan god Pan, Peter answered Jesus’ question. Jesus was and is the Son of the living God and not of the dead idols carved into the face of the enormous rock that towered over them. Jesus deliberately forced His disciples to compare Him to the world’s belief systems, in all their splendor and cultural force and influence.

After Peter made his confession, Jesus gave Peter an “Atta boy” and then said to Peter and all the other disciples, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” Roman Catholic theology believes that the rock Jesus was talking about was the man Peter. Peter’s name was “Petros” and “petros” literally meant rock. The nickname Jesus gave Simon Peter was “Rocky”. Peter was the primary leader of the disciples next to Jesus Himself. So our Roman Catholic

brothers and sisters believe that Jesus was saying, “Upon this man, He will raise up His church.” Peter was the church’s first Pope according to our Roman Catholic friends.

Protestants don’t necessarily agree with that interpretation. They argue that it is not upon the man Peter but upon the confession Peter makes that Jesus intends to build His church. Presbyterians are Protestants so we have put our weight down on the fact that it’s Peter’s confident confession that Jesus is indeed who he said He was that is the foundation of the Christian faith and the Christian church.

I think there is truth in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant interpretations. But there is another possible meaning to what Jesus is saying that I find super interesting and extremely challenging. Could it be that Jesus is saying He intends to build His church on top of the physical rock where people said the pagan god of the underworld lived? Upon the rock that represented the fertility practices and all the misguided values and priorities of their day, Jesus will build a community of faithful followers. And through His disciples, Jesus intends to show the world that there is indeed another way of living. Jesus is going to call His church to live right in the middle of the most powerful, culture-shaping influences in our world. It is in the middle of all that the church will bring a message of hope and freedom to the world.

In the next sentence Jesus asserts that the gates of hell will not be able to prevail against the church He will build. That is not a description of a defensive position on the part of the Christian community. It is a call to be on the move in the world.

I think many of us see the church as primarily a strong fortress where we can run and find shelter. That image does not come close to exhausting Jesus' understanding of the community of Christians and the work to which we are called. The church is indeed to be a place of refuge for the wounded and weary, but it is also to be a base for the equipping of people to live and share the gospel in the world. Jesus sees his church as a place where disciples are formed and sent into the world to be agents of change.

Jesus says that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. In battle, the gates of a city wall are designed to defend the city. Gates are not offensive weapons. Jesus tells His disciples that the forces of hell will not be able to defend themselves against the church of Jesus Christ when we are serving Him in the power of God's Holy Spirit.

The image Jesus uses is not of the devil beating on the church, attempting to bring it down. Instead, He says that our mission in the world is to take on the work of hell itself in our culture and throughout the earth. Therefore, the church must be a place where Christian people are trained to take on the forces of injustice, wherever God sends us. And we take on those forces of injustice by proclaiming through what we say and how we live our lives, the love, the mercy, the understanding, and the grace of Jesus that we ourselves have received.

Let me say one more thing. Jesus does not say, "Upon this rock, YOU will build my church." And He also does not say, "Upon this rock I will build YOUR church." All of us need to take special note of this because all of us have a tendency to think that the church needs to be the way we think it needs to be. We think the church is here to primarily meet our needs, and be the way it has always been.

We should pay careful attention to the subject of this sentence and whom it is that builds Christ's church. Jesus says, "Upon this Rock I will build MY church." And Jesus' church is a place of radical encouragement and blessing and it is a community that goes into the world to live sacrificially so that all might come to know Him.

So, what does that mean for you and me? It's a daunting task that Jesus has put before us. It's a call to a deeper discipleship. It's a call to greater sacrifice for the sake of a world in need. It's an invitation to a deeper relationship with Jesus. It's a call to being filled with God's Spirit, to seek reconciliation with others, to ask for forgiveness from those we have hurt and forgive those who have wounded us. It is a call to love with the love that God Himself has loved us.

It is indeed a daunting task that Jesus has put before us. It's as if He's saying, on a far larger scale,

I know you don't really know how to surf very well but if you'll let me heal you, forgive you, transform you and use you I know you can make a difference in the lives of the people in your life.

Jesus Christ has begun a good work in and among us and He is going to complete the work He started. He is going to keep working to make this place a place of healing and transformation, as well as a base camp from which we will go and love the world in Jesus' Name.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*