

## *“Love and Obey”*

*Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:36-40*

February 12, 2023

Last night, I recalled something that occurred in the final semester of high school. I'd already gotten into the college of my choice and was pretty much coasting my way into graduation. I still had this one class, this one teacher, Marsha Newton-Graham who seemed to actually want to test us on actual material. It was AP Biology and it was a huge test on plants. I knew going in the test was going to have three sections. Well, as I said, it was my senior year and, at a certain point, I'd slowly checked out of doing readings or homework or really anything that resembled work, actually. So, the night before the exam, I tried to figure out how much studying I needed to do. I figured I knew the first of the three sections, pretty well. Figured with some study, I'd get 80% of those questions right. On the second section, ahhh, I guessed I knew about 75% of the material. Then, on the last section, I thought I could get about 40% of the questions. Wanting to only study about an hour, I figured I'd shore up sections one and two. Sound like a good plan, right? Well, not so much. I made a 32. Needless to say, with a score that low, I was invited to speak with the teacher after class. During our conversation, I told her about my strategy. She offered a counter-solution. She told me I might have done better, looking at the final section and integrating it with the rest of the material. Sometimes, she said, what came last was the thing that helped make sense of all the material, especially when it came to the world of plants.

With that in mind, here is a reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 13-18. Hear now the Word of our Lord, Jesus Christ. *“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you?’ He asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by My Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.’”*

Per my AP biology teacher's insight of many years ago, I want to begin our discussion of this passage at the very end with the hopes of integrating the entire passage. The whole, “Gates of Hell” part. What Jesus says is that the Gates of Hell will not be triumphant. Notice, to begin with, that this statement would necessarily entail that evil will keep on trying to triumph. Honestly, I think this part is pretty easily verifiable given the data these days just as it probably has been since the Fall. But what are the gates of hell or hades and what do they have to do with the rest of this passage?

Well, to begin with it draws our attention to the fact that evil, under the banner of some otherworldly power is vying to control things. Now whether you want to plot that out as the DEVIL or something less defined, a quick glance at any internet news compiler most days confirms the truthfulness of the Bible here. Thankfully, we don't have to worry about evil triumphing over everything and everyone.

Scripture reminds us in several different ways that the end is determined. In the 16th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus declares to the gathered disciples, and to us, *“Take courage, I have conquered (past tense) the world.”* Then, turning to Revelation we see that there is no jeopardy for the entire world lapsing into eternal darkness. Jesus wins. The good guys ride off into the sunset so to speak. That isn't to say that there aren't still skirmishes going on.

The best way I've ever heard to think about this is using a World War II analogy. Once the Allied forces successfully secured a beachhead at Normandy, the European theater was essentially won. Supplies could be flooded in from America and other places. Germany had no such ability as their forces were already beleaguered. That didn't mean fighting didn't still occur. Or lives lost. Gosh, y'all, did you ever see that HBO show, *Band of Brothers*? It recounts the efforts of Easy Company, a paratrooper squadron that jumped in to Normandy. It's a good show but there's one episode that is just so terribly depressing. It's right towards the end. Hitler is holed up in the Eagle's Nest, other Germans are beginning to sue for peace. The war is in its final hours. But there's still fighting. This one episode tells the story of a young lieutenant who knows how close to the end things are. But there are still active missions and he sends a young paratrooper into a dangerous situation. The young man ends up getting shot and killed. Then, the call comes in. Cease fire.

Ugh, it just breaks my heart. Such a pointless and unnecessary loss of life. And you know what else breaks my heart? There are still so many people lost out there.

Look around, or perhaps look honestly into your own heart. For many, the gates of hell have encroached all the way up and into their lives. Oh, there are the obvious ones who're lapsing into darkness. But, make no mistake about it, there are a thousand other forms of darkness which can penetrate into a person's soul.

And while we don't have to worry about utter darkness for everyone forever, make no mistake about it, there remains the potential for losing people. And here, whether you want to take that on a here-and-now level or on an eternal one, the Bible gives you cause to believe both.

But fear not, Jesus reminds us here in Matthew's Gospel. The gates of hell will not prevail but they are still to be both feared AND FOUGHT AGAINST. That's right. There is a struggle going on right now. People are being won from the darkness and brought into the light right now.

But take heart, good people. As we read backwards from the end trying to integrate the whole passage together, we hear that there is a force out there, duly empowered to continually work against the encroachment of evil into people's lives. What Jesus says is that the church is the counterbalance in this time and place against the very gates of Hell.

But what is the church? A question we've been asking in the sermons for a couple of weeks now. Ask most folks and what they'll point to is, like, this building or thousands of others like it. And, while from a Merriam-Webster standpoint, they're exactly right, from a Jesus-perspective, such an answer is about as right as the majority of my answers on that biology exam from so many years ago...WRONG. Church is actually a compound word in the Koine Greek and it has absolutely NOTHING to do with any kind of building whatsoever. Like I mentioned the last couple of weeks, Ek-klesia is the word for church and it's the combination of two words. The people who are sent OUT. That's what it means. People heading not into a church building, but out into the world. And, again, the scriptures make fairly obvious for us what we're being sent out away from the comfort of our lives to do.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus reminds us to "*go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.*" He tells us again in the first chapter of Acts. As He prepares to ascend into heaven, Jesus says "*You will be My witnesses until the end of the earth.*" Meaning that this church, the people called out, were to begin walking from right where they're at towards the furthest reaches of the earth, all along their way, witnessing to the power of Christ and evangelizing in His name.

*Church isn't a building, is a movement of people out away from the comfort of their lives into the difficult, but joy giving work of evangelism.* There's that dreaded E-Word we do our best to avoid.

But notice, it is the only way that the gates of hell stay right where they're at. Now look, I get it, what we'd like is for people to wake up one morning, realize that their life is out of whack, and walk in these doors for us to help. Sad to say, it doesn't work like that. Yes, people are hurting, but sometimes, they don't quite know why.

I was in a counseling session a few years back when someone shared something interesting. They told me I could tell you. You see, this particular man had been having awful knee pain for quite some time. He'd gone to his regular doctor who believed it was a knee malady that would recover with some rest. Three weeks later, it was clear that was wrong as the pain in his knee was worse. Then, grudgingly, he went to an orthopedic doctor who did a full work up. Turned out there was nothing wrong with the man's knee. BUT his hips were both completely shot. The pain was wrongly perceived as coming from the wrong place. As soon as the man realized it was his hips and not his knees, he took action on his hip and the knee pain disappeared.

Man, do a lot of people do something similar with their lives. Feeling empty, instead of coming to church to get filled, they go out and buy things, or they do things. Oh, and maybe they work for a while, but then, just like that man, they stop working. Another remedy is tried. On and on it goes. They've made what scholars call at Fundamental Assignment Error. They've misdiagnosed their misery.

These days, because the church of Jesus Christ is engaged in so dreadfully little evangelism, I mean, when was the last time you saw an adult baptism, most people will NEVER correct their error, unless someone shows them an alternative path that leads to an abundant life here and an eternal life tomorrow. And we don't do it by being a jerk, telling them they're going to hell if they don't or trying to cram a lot of rules down their throat. All the studies show, if you're going to be influential in someone's life, you've got to put in some effort. Get to know them. Learn their kids' names, what excites them. What you can be praying for them about.

I'm blessed to be doing another Kairos walk in a few months. In Kairos prison ministry, we have a saying – "Make a friend, be a friend, BRING A FRIEND TO JESUS." And we've got a way we encourage that and it

isn't by telling people about how you're getting all Holy and everything. It's far simpler than that. Keeps our egos out of it. It's simply this. Listen, listen, love, love.

This is the calling of all who are called out into the world by the Lord, Jesus Christ. The church is to be continually engaged in the reaping and sowing of the harvest through interpersonal engagement. If we're not, we're really little more than a self-focused spiritualist club.

I had the occasion to preach a couple of years ago at the First Presbyterian Church of York. Nice folks. Got there early and decided to sit in on a Sunday School class. The topic was evangelism. The speaker began with a question. A daring one, I thought, given our quiet Presbyterian nature. "How do YOU evangelize?" with the clear Biblical presupposition that to be in the church, to be the people called out, necessitated it. One nice woman's answer was a pretty good summation of most of our efforts in this regard. She said that every day she got up and tried to be as nice as she could in the world. That, she said, was her evangelism. The teacher, again, more daring than I'm used to seeing, asked her a question. "Isn't that what you'd do anyway?" "Yes", the woman replied. She would do that anyway. "Where's the effort in that?" inquired the teacher. Silence. Look, it's not a topic we like. But let's back up one section. What happens if we, the church, aren't engaged in this process? Oh, that's right, more gates of hell approaching in more lives. More people lost in skirmishes that simply need not take place. So, look, I know all the arguments but they basically boil down to some variation of I don't know think I can do it. Not good enough, not smart enough. Not, well, a perfect Christian.

Which brings us to our last section. Who is the church built upon according to Jesus? Peter. So, let's look at the record on him. How'd he do on this thing called life? Well, on one hand, here, in this first section, so to speak, he's aces. Jesus, he rightfully declares in the Messiah, the Son of God. The One here to save us. But then, when Jesus takes him up on the mountain and is transfigured, His full divinity revealed in sparkling glory, Peter is the one to say "Hey, let's build some places here, and just hang out here forever." Wrong answer.

Then, there's that time when Jesus is arrested. A cock crows three times and he denies the very thing he's declaring here... "I DO NOT KNOW THE MAN." His denial forever etched into the pages of our Holy Word.

Oh, how many of us fail to be a force for good in the world because we aren't perfect. We've made mistakes, everyone of us. But what if it IS our weaknesses our understanding that we're not perfect that makes us the best evangelists? I mean, look at Peter. Imperfect, denying Peter. Yet nevertheless, he's the rock upon which the church is built.

Could it be that when we understand ourselves as weak, fallen, limited creatures that we are poised to be the BEST evangelists? I think so! Because Peter is just one in a long line of failed and fallen vessels the Lord has used throughout the dawn of time to do His good work in the world. Noah gets drunk. Moses kills a man and tries to shirk his work. Samson, well, he has a bit of a Philistine woman problem on and on it goes right up through Peter and now, in this day and age, right up to you. Now look, if Jesus asked you "*who do you say He is*" just like He inquired of Peter all those years ago, chances are, everyone here'd get it right now, wouldn't we?

But how are we doing on those other sections. Are we aware of the pain and suffering right outside our doors? Do we know that there is still evil on the loose, causing damage and destruction? Do we realize that the church isn't supposed to be a place where we get fed and do nothing else? Did we know that, no matter what excuse we insert into the mix, our lack of evangelism isn't in accordance with the Lord's will for us or our lives? Folks, this is not a test that we want to get a 32 on, is it?

Let me tell you a little bit about a man named John who I thought, in the end, got it all RIGHT. And I'm going to tell you, I think John comes close to acing this thing. But it only happened for him towards the ending years of his life. There was a man of great faith at my last church. No doubt, the man held a love for Jesus in his heart and he wanted others to have it as well. He poured untold hours trying to get people to hear him out about Jesus. Frankly, he was growing frustrated with the results. No ONE was coming to Jesus, let alone a church service. We'd pray together, weekly, as to why this was happening. I tried to tell the man his opening move stunk. He was one of those fear mongers still out there. Chances are, this man would've never helped bring anyone to Jesus Christ had it not been for the very same event that was going to lead him to glory. The man got cancer. And somehow, feeling tired and lonely and sad, the man got it. It wasn't about fear, it was, at it has always been, about love. It was then that the man came alive in Christ, I'm not kidding. Somehow, somehow, when he was weak, he realized, there's more to this thing than knowing the Bible and telling people why they're going to hell. John was diagnosed with cancer. It was there and then, he took a turn for the better. John

began looking forward to chemotherapy. I know, sounds strange, let me tell you why.

John would go in there with a desire to know people, what kind of cancer they were fighting, how their treatment was going. He'd offer to pray for them once he knew. Most, he said, accepted. He also identified doctors and nurses and began complimenting them and thanking them for their care. He'd ask them questions about their kids, offer to pray for them, too. I visited him once, at what looked to be the end, up at Duke University hospital. On the floor he was at, everyone knew John. They'd come into his room and he'd come alive. John beat back cancer that time. And, I'm not kidding, he began bringing people to Jesus. By no means was a cloak of perfection put on him by an almighty hand. He made mistakes. But he was heading in the right direction. That right direction continued well after I'd left River Hills Community Church. One day, I got a call from a mutual friend who told me John had been moved to the Hospice house in Dallas, NC. Then, nearly three weeks later, the same friend told me that, amazingly, John had been discharged. Look y'all, here was a man that was, at heart, a committed Christian. He tried to evangelize through fear, through theology, through intimidation, none of them worked.

Love did though. A love that recognized imperfection was part of the deal. Agape love. The love that Christ shows us when He says to His Father, not this cup, not this time, but Your will, not mine, be done and then He walks to a lonely cross. Already He's been whipped, beaten, scourged, humiliated. And then He dies a pain-filled death. The kind John really began to be aware of, when he had to encounter his own weakness. You see, what makes us weak makes us relatable.

Show yourself to the world, hurt and broken and watch and see others follow you right here. Right to Cook's Church. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.