

Christ is building His church!

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Well, beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we all do a lot of building in life; some of you, for instance, have built your own homes or rebuilt, renovated; we talk about building families, or we build careers, or we build portfolios, kids build Lego sets or Minecraft worlds, or resumes. We all build many things, we all build many things but one thing we never build is the church. None of us builds the church. We may belong to the church, we may work in the church and for the church, we may be very busy in the life of the church, but none of us builds the church. From our text in Matthew 16 we learn that, from our text we learn that Christ builds the church. Isn't that what he says in Matthew 16:18 in the midst of a conversation with Peter in which Peter has confessed him as Christ, the Son of the living God, and that confession and all of the realities built in that confession become also the rock on which Christ will build his church, but the key line for this morning is that he says, "I will build My church."

So he's at work and how encouraging that is meant to be because it reminds us that the church is not up to us. Of course, we have a role, we have responsibilities, we have to preach the gospel and make disciples and we have to be faithful, we have to use the keys of the kingdom of heaven, all of that is true, we have responsibilities and we need to feel that and we need to be busy with that and we need to do our prayerful best with all of that, but we do not build the church, Christ does. And again, how encouraging that's meant to be for how hopeless the work would be otherwise, how weak we are, how ignorant, how limited, how sinful. The truth is we struggle many times to build many things in life, we often mess things up even, don't we? Think of the projects that maybe are unfinished in your life, what's all in your garage, for instance, or in your attic, or in your basement, how many things you started but never finished, or gave up on, or broke, even. How we all struggle and then if we had to build the church? But Christ says that he will do it and he has been doing it for years and centuries, and he is doing it even now and he will do it to the very end of human history when finally the church will be complete and finally the church will be glorified.

"Christ is building His church," that's our theme for this morning and when we ask the question, what does that really mean, we can say at least three things. Christ is building his church, first of all, that means a people. A people. Christ is building a people so the church is more than a building. In fact, a building is, in a way, completely incidental to

the church. We need a building because of the weather, that's true, because of winter weather, all kinds of weather. Were it not for the cold and snow of winter and during the summer the rain and the heat, were it not for that fact we wouldn't need a building. Just remember how we met outside last summer just over here, even a couple of Sundays without tents under the open sky. And we learned then what we knew, of course, but we learned it once more that the building is not what makes the church, as much as it helps and we need it and as much as we're very thankful also for this building and we do our best to take care of it and maintain it and for all kinds of good reasons still, what Christ is putting together is not a building but a people. Christ Jesus is building a people.

Now in a way that is so obvious, why are we mentioning it? And yet it is a point important to remember and to confess, the church is a people. Think in our text where Christ speaks here about building his church, how he is addressing his disciples, and again there's no building in sight. They're on a journey, they're on the road and Jesus Christ is speaking to his disciples and they will form the nucleus of the New Testament church, the 12, and later 120, then on the day of Pentecost we read in Acts 2:41 that 3,000 souls were added to them, and at the end of Acts 2:47 we're told that the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. Again, people. God's work, Christ's work is all about building a people. Think, too, how in our Catechism we confess this as we read together from Answer 54, "The Son of God from the beginning of the world to the end gathers, defends and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life."

The church is a people. Christ is building a people. And again, let's understand, let's be very conscientious about this: Christ himself is doing that. "I build," he says. "I will build." And in our Catechism he defends or he gathers, rather, defends and preserves, and so that means that when you belong to the church, when you are, as our Catechism describes, a living member of the church, how did that happen? Well, the reason is this, the sole reason is this: Christ himself has gathered you. Christ himself has brought you in. Christ himself is defending you and preserving you. Christ himself has found you and drawn and made you his, and so you have become part of his church-building work.

Well, how important is this to see, how humbling and how important, because when you are a believer then you learn to say, "I'm here. I am even what I am by the grace of God. I have no other explanation for it. I belong because of Jesus Christ, because He searched me out, because He rescued me, because He saved me and drew me close and made me part of His church, His people." And he did so according to God's eternal plan, and he did so through his word and Spirit, and the basic storyline of every living member is the same, Christ has gotten to you through his word and by his Spirit's power and taught you that you desperately need him, and he has brought you to trust in him and to look to him alone and to receive from him all that you need for this life and for the life to come, and he has made you to learn how you are so dependent on him for pardon and peace and power, and you are learning also to cling to this Christ.

So he incorporates you and he integrates you into his church. To use building imagery for a moment as we find it in Scripture in 1 Peter 2, for instance, and elsewhere, the Lord

Jesus makes you a living stone in the temple. He makes you a living member of his people. And how many of us can tell about that in our life? How many of us that happened also already in our youth as we were raised by godly parents in a covenant home and under the promise of God's grace, and with that promise signed and sealed to our foreheads in our baptism, how often the Lord God works through covenant lines to gather in his people and through the generations. And so many of us can tell about how as young people we learned to fear the Lord and to love Jesus Christ and to trust him and to follow him, and though the journey may have involved many fits and starts and stumblings along the way, yet that has been our journey. In some cases, maybe it was a very dramatic change, maybe in time of crisis in our life or as a result of a close call, or maybe during a breakdown in relationship, or maybe through the loss of someone close. In whatever the circumstances exactly, Jesus used that time and that moment to enter in and to call us to life and it was sudden and it was dramatic. Or maybe in your life there was no crisis, as such, none that you can identify but simply over time very quietly and very gently the Lord woke you up and took you along. And again, maybe in your youth or maybe it was later in your life, that can be too, but at some point and in some way the living Christ entered in and began to work and brought you in and brought you to belong to his people. In any case, this is what he has been doing for hundreds and hundreds of years and all around the world, and in land after land, nation after nation. Christ has been doing what he said he would do, "I will build My church." And so he has. And so he is. And so he shall even until that day when from every tongue, tribe and nation his people will stand before him. Christ is true to his word.

In thinking about that, yet, how Christ in building his church is building a people, thinking about that, who knows what he might be doing even here where we live. Even as we find ourselves surrounded by people in our communities and more and more people, how many are moving to Niagara, how many homes are going up in this region, apartments and condos, and all sorts of people are coming from all over and might Christ be seeking any of them and even many of them, and might he be already at work to gather them into his church? And what might our responsibilities be also in that regard, to be faithful witnesses of Christ and to pray that he might build his church and increase her even more, even here?

Well, that's something to think about and to talk about and to be busy about as we can be, but Christ is building his church, that means he's building a people and at the same time there is so much more to say in view of our text and in view of the Catechism, let's go, then, to our second point, how Christ is building his church and building a people together. Together. In other words, a people in community. So the church is not like a motel, no doubt we've all been to a motel where everyone lives under one roof for a night but all in separate rooms and usually having nothing to do with one another, maybe seeing each other at the breakfast room but for the rest we all live separate lives and have no connection. That's not the church. No, the church is a people together. The church is a true community.

"I believe the communion of saints," that is a statement about the church being a people together, and in an effort to understand this, let's think of two things in terms of this

communion. Two things, one is that this togetherness is in Christ, in fact, that's the first place, together in Christ. And we say this because faith in Christ, to believe in him means really to enter into a relationship with him so that we become intimately connected to him, we become part of him, attached to him, there's a bond or a union, we are one with him. How important it is to remind yourselves of this and to think about this and to believe this, because it's not something obvious or tangible maybe, it's not something you can immediately see with your eyes. That can be sometimes a challenge, can't it? We have trouble conceptualizing what it means to be in Christ. We can talk about branches in the vine as Jesus does in John 15 and that helps, and maybe some other images as well, but this is what the Bible consistently teaches, that every believer is intimately connected to Christ; through faith I am united to him and bound to him and belong to him.

Think of the many times Paul talks about how believers are in Christ. In fact, someone has counted Paul talks about believers being in Christ 143 times, 143 times in his letters Paul refers to believers being in Christ, and the Bible speaks of that reality elsewhere almost another 40 times. So the Bible plainly teaches us, helps us to understand when you believe in Christ you belong to him, you are in him, you are united to him. So we could have asked in Lord's Day 21 as we read it in the first Question and Answer that Christ gathers and defends and preserves to himself, to himself a church, and in Answer 55, the next one, "every one who believes, being members of Christ, are, in common, partakers of Him and of all His riches and gifts."

Do we think about how close, how intimate, how tight the relationship is between a believer and Christ? Do you think about it for yourself, how when you believe in him you are in him? You see, when we understand this, then also to belong to the church becomes all the more meaningful and precious. We don't just have our name on a church list, we don't just on occasion fill a church pew, we're not simply individuals or persons or families who come to this building and do some things in this building and go on. No, there is a connection to the Son of God Incarnate. He has saved us and joined us to him in a bond and union, in a relationship that is close and special, even one that can never be broken.

Christ builds his people together in himself. In himself. Is this now why it is so good also to be together as a people, and why it hurts when we cannot be together? Because we're connected to each other in him and we find our community together in him, and we all understand how we need him, and we are all learning to trust him, and increasingly to love him and want to live for him at least when it's true with us, and looking forward someday to see him when he returns in glory. You see, Christ is the tie that binds. He is the Savior we together confess. So together in Christ, this is what transcends family connections, this is what transcends ethnic relationships, this is what unites us no matter how different we may be otherwise. Different color. Different language. Different status in society. Different background. Different experience. Different gifts. Different likes. We can be as different as you can imagine and yet so together in Christ. Just think of that great picture in Revelation of people from every tongue and tribe and nation all together singing the praises of the Lord.

So together in Christ but with that and flowing from that, when Christ builds his church he builds a people together in himself and together in love. That's the second aspect to this point: together in love. Now on the one hand, this is an inference or an application of together in Christ. In other words, given that we are together in him and given that we are so closely united in him, together needing him and together trusting him and together enjoying him, well, given that it only makes sense that we not only love him but learn to love one another and overflow even in love to one another. I mean, we are fellow sinners saved by grace, brothers and sisters in the same family really, and so we're together in love.

It's an application or the logical conclusion of together in Christ. It's also a point repeatedly stressed in the New Testament. Think of Jesus himself close to the end of his earthly life and he said, "This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. So because I have loved you and in the way I have loved you, you love one another." To be together in Christ we ought to be together in love. Ephesians 5:2, walk in love. Colossians 3:14, put on love. Ephesians 4:3, bear with one another in love.

This is the privilege and the calling of the church of Jesus Christ, together in love and, you know, that means so many things, that writes the script for our life and the way we behave and the way we treat one another. It means that among our fellowship we ought to be so patient and kind with each other. It means that we consistently think the best of each other. It means that we seek to look out for each other and encourage each other. As we strive to worship together and serve the Lord together and to be his people together, how important it is to bear with each other and to care for each other, and never to tear each other down and never to neglect or despise each other. Sometimes it means having to be honest about sin as we see it in each other, but always to do so with tenderness and kindness, and always to seek for a spirit of service one to another. Our Catechism speaks here about each one readily and cheerfully employing his or her gifts for the advantage and salvation of the other members.

So the thing that should mark us as we relate together is not what can I get from others but how can I serve these others; not what's in it for me but how can I lift them up. Isn't it true that when a church learns that, when a church practices that, that is what Christ is after. When he builds his church, when he builds a people, he builds her together in himself in love and this, too, congregation, we need to remember, don't we? And on the one hand how thankful we may be for how many ways this love is evident and it is obvious that we are a congregation together in Christ in love, that's something to acknowledge and that's something to credit Christ for.

He is building his church, remember, and he is achieving this among us but, of course, at the same time we can all be convicted and all challenged to keep doing and keep growing. Maybe we can ask ourselves and above all ask the Lord, "Is there any member, is there any member we are not loving as we could and should? Is there anyone in the congregation that I may be hurting instead of helping? Is there any way, perhaps, that I am failing to contribute to the togetherness of the congregation, maybe in my spirit or maybe in the way I talk whether through pride or laziness or selfishness?" As we know,

these things can still be in our heart and still come out of our life and still mar our fellowship. Is there anything I or you could be doing or should be doing to serve and bless the people with whom we are together in the church in Christ?

Christ is building his church, meaning a people and a people together, and then one more thing we can say about this, this morning, a people together forgiven. The people Christ is building together are above all a people forgiven and that means that their sins are washed away, every offense of which they are guilty, and we are all guilty by nature, but every offense is blotted out and no longer charged against us, and forever taken away through the blood of Christ, my old sins and my sinful nature.

The church Christ builds is a people together forgiven. This, of course, is the very heart of the gospel, as we well know it's why Christ came, it's the reason we need him so desperately for though we have been made created by God, the reality is that we are rebels, we are sinners before him. Already in Adam we are fallen and we are defiled, we deserve to be judged and punished forever, and not now just with Adam's sin but the whole history of our sin ever since. What a sad and painful reality and true for every one of us but, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," and him whom we know as the Lord Jesus Christ, he came to save his people from their sin, and what that meant for him was to go the way of the cross as the suffering Savior, as the sin-bearer, as the one on whom the Lord was laying the iniquity of us all. All the transgression, all the sin, all the rebellion of his people, God gave it to his Son, the burden of that God laid upon his Son, and his Son went to the cross and his Son hung there for it and died there for it, and he was able to offer the perfect sacrifice. He offered himself. He was able to bring his blood into the most holy place. He was able to secure an atonement for all his people, for all his people full and everlasting pardon for all sin, every sin no matter what we have done, no matter what we have done or not done. All of it, all of it may be washed away in the blood of the Redeemer.

Forgiven, he says. Remember that woman who was caught in the act of adultery and brought to him by her accusers and Jesus dealt with them and they left, and then he dealt with her. He dealt with her and he said, "Neither do I condemn you." And so he deals with all who come to him, all who are brought to him, all who can only stand there with shame and say, "I'm sorry, Lord, I've blown it once again." He forgives. Every sinner who turns to him and trusts in him, everyone he gathers by his Spirit and word and makes a living member he forgives. We are forgiven in him and through him. On account of him we are forgiven. You see, that's our boast and our glory. We don't say as a community or as people, "Look at us how good we are. We've got our life put together all so well." No, we say, "If you want to look at us, you see a mess. If you want to look at us, you see many failures. If you want to look at us, you see broken, sinful, rebellious people who blow it left to ourselves and who deserve to go to hell, but through Jesus Christ we have been forgiven. He has paid the debt we owe. He has borne our sin away. He has opened the gate of heaven for undeserving sinners. And He has purchased for us eternal life. Look at us and you see simply lost sinful people but look at Him, He is the great Savior who forgives lost sinful people." You see, that's our boast. That's our message. That's our glory. Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord.

And congregation, that's what Christ does when he builds his church, what Christ does when he gathers you to himself, when he brings you to faith, when you learn to say, "I need Him more even than I know, and can say I trust Him so poorly but I trust Him still." He does that, he makes that to be, and when he does that, he tells you you're forgiven. He tells you that God has forgiven you for the sake of himself and, again, is this not at the heart of what it means to be a Christian and to be a living member of the church of Christ? And again, this is why in Revelation we find the church of God, the saints of God, the believers singing the song of the Lamb of God. "You are worthy," they say, "for You have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

And the heart of it is exactly this: through him we're forgiven. Can you believe it? It's true, we're forgiven. Oh, how wonderful, how amazing that is, how glorious God is in Christ together with the Holy Spirit, the one true God, the Savior God, Christ is building his church, a people together forgiven. What a privilege to belong to the church, and how many of us are, I mean, now living members? And let's be so humble and thankful and be continually in awe of that, and let us be stirred up also this morning to worship and adore the Savior and to be all the more committed to him and faithful to his church and for her, and let us press on and persevere as living members knowing that Christ Jesus has promised that not even the gates of hell can prevail against him and prevent him from finishing what he has set out to do.

He will build his church and if we are not yet part of her, which is possible because we should realize that simply to be here or to be in the church book or to be involved or even very involved, all good but none of that is what makes a living member a living member. A living member is when you have become alive to God in Jesus Christ. A living member is when you are born again by the Holy Spirit. A living member is when you have turned from sin and have begun to trust in Christ. If that's not you, then may I appeal to the children and to the young people and to all of us listening whether here or in the hall or at home, if you are not a living member you need to understand that as close as you are, really in a way you are still outside alone and unforgiven.

That's if you are not a living member whether you see it or not, and isn't it so dark outside and lonely and empty and miserable? And if you stay outside it's only going to get worse. The Bible speaks about darkness, outer darkness, blackness of darkness, everlasting hell. That's for all those not part of the church Christ is building. Don't let that be you, anyone listening. Don't be at peace to be outside, to remain unliving, not living, dead still. But listen again as Christ himself, the builder of the church, the builder of the church invites you and calls you to come to him, to come and be part of his people together and forgiven. Oh, he invites you and calls you and he comes and says that all who come to him he will never turn away. Amen.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we praise You for the church that You are building, a people together, forgiven. What a wonder, Lord Jesus Christ, and through Your saving work and we pray that You will make us all to be living members and then also to grow and increase and mature more and more, and to be faithful all our days. Please bless this word and make it fruitful, make it effective in everyone's life, and we ask You to hear our prayer, to remember us further for Your name's sake alone. Amen.