

The Church's One Foundation
Matthew 16:13-20

What do people say the church is?

Well, the Wikipedia page about the Lutheran Church of Australia certainly has some interesting information about what people say the *Lutheran* Church is! According to Wikipedia, because of its German heritage the LCA is deeply pacifist, as evidenced by a memorial to Bertha von Suttner in Wagga Wagga! No, I'd never heard of her either! According to Wikipedia, the LCA advocates for film censorship. According to Wikipedia, the LCA rejects the notion of human rights! You will, however, be happy to know that, according to Wikipedia, the LCA celebrates Easter and Christmas . . . and 'congregants also celebrate Reformation Sunday with a special feast'!

Now, you might agree or disagree with what people say about the LCA, but perhaps the more pertinent question is: "What do *you* say the church is?" And, I think that is an important question to ask in the light of our current discussion on the financial situation of St John's. Especially if you got the impression that the church is in a precarious position. And, even if the financial information and discussion holds no interest for you it is still an important question to ponder, "What do you say the church is?"

As you ponder that I'd like to share a quote with you. I don't normally quote other people's work in sermons and this quote was not said by anyone well-known or famous, it's not very profound, or even interesting, it's just something I randomly stumbled across during the week. Here it is . . .

We live in a cultural moment in which the religious impulse in community life is beating a hasty retreat. Every other month a new survey comes out showing a decline in religious belief, a decline in church attendance, a decline in personal religious practice and so on. Those secular surveys are interspersed with bulletins from denominational headquarters about church closures, administrative down-sizing and other acts of retrenchment. We go to meetings of our church councils and see the bills for shoring up our deteriorating physical plants, while absorbing the treasurer's report of the decline in per capita giving.

End of quote.

None of that will be news to you. And, I didn't have to quote someone else's words, I could have just said it in my own words, couldn't I? I shared it because that was something someone wrote a dozen years ago on the other side of the world. Which shows discussions about finances and viability and attendance and future are not unique to us . . . and they're not unique to this particular time and place . . . they will probably always be with us . . . and as important as they are they are *not* what the church is!

The church is not a bank account . . . no matter how much or how little money is in it. Our bank account is important because I like to be paid . . . and it's important our staff can be paid . . . and it's important that we can keep the lights on . . . and it's important we are good stewards of our resources . . . and it's important we can run the programs we run . . . and it's important we have discussions about these things, but as we do, it's important to remember that this is not what the church is.

The church is not a property portfolio.

The church is not the pastor.

The church is not the number of people who sit in these seats.

The church is not how friendly we are.

The church is not even the programs we run.

No, no, no . . . the church stands on much more fragile ground than that! Our position is much more precarious than any bank statement will tell us . . . because when it comes down to it . . . when all other distractions are stripped away . . . the church is simply the answer to *Jesus'* question: "Who do you say that I am?" Or better: "Who *are* you saying I am?"

In other words, the church is a confession of faith! The church is a confession of faith.

"Who do you say I am?" Jesus asks Simon Peter. And Simon Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" There it is . . . the confession of faith! That's the rock on which Jesus builds the church . . . on Peter and his confession of faith . . . on his answer to the question, "Who do you say I am?" That's the church.

What was Jesus thinking?! Has *he* got rocks in his head?! The foundation of the church is one individual and his confession of faith! And, look at that individual! Sure, he makes a great confession of faith *this* time, but next time he stuffs it up . . . next time he totally doesn't get it . . . and, before you know it, he's denying Jesus all together! And, *that's* the rock the church is built on?!

No wonder the church is in a precarious position . . . the existence of the church is always dependent on a confession of faith . . . the confession of faith of individual people . . . the church is always dependent on *you* saying who Jesus is and on *me* saying who Jesus is. And, I don't know about you, but I might get it right today, but tomorrow I'll totally stuff it up, or I'll miss the opportunity, or, given the right pressure, I'd probably deny Jesus all together too!

What was Jesus thinking?

And, I want to say to Jesus, "Lord, you mean to say I can't just look at the bank balance and know the church is secure? And, I can't look at this fine, solid, renovated building that's been here for 60 years and know the church is secure? And, I can't look at a ten year strategic plan and know that the church is secure? And, I can't look at these wonderful, upstanding people in front of me and know that the church is secure? Do you mean, Lord, that I have to trust that it is *you* who builds the church? I have to trust it's *you* who builds the church on my fragile, fickle confession of who you are? And, I have to trust that even my confession of faith doesn't come from something inside me but is given to me by you."

And, in my mind, I see Jesus nodding and saying, "Blessed are you, John, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven."

And, that's how it is, isn't it? We know it instinctively. You don't confess Jesus as your Lord and Saviour because the church's bank balance is healthy. You don't tell others about Jesus because church attendance is up . . . or down . . . this week! You don't confess Jesus as the Son of the living God because the coffee is so good after service! No, we make a confession of faith – as timid and fumbling as that

might be – we make a confession of faith because we have encountered Jesus. Jesus has spoken to us. Jesus has done something to us. Jesus has impacted on our lives. We know his love, and mercy and grace. And, because of that, even when the church seems precarious and fragile we trust in Jesus' promise that even the gates of Hades will not prevail against it . . . for as long as there is even just one person to make a confession of faith there is the church, for that is *what* the church is.

And, once we've grasped that, then we can talk about finances.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
Pentecost 13, 2026