

Greetings to all the Saints at Manatee Life Church,

SCRIPTURE:

Matthew 16:17-18 (MSG) – Larger reading: Matthew 16:1-20

Jesus came back, “God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I’m going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

STORY:

A little boy, having been told that the church was God’s house, asked: “When’s he going to move in?”

OBSERVATION:

During the summer of 2010, I sat with a family as they prepared for the funeral service for their father and grandfather. They were sharing their remembrance of a life once lived ... how involved the deceased was in church and the VFW. Then the statement was made. Oh, how I wished that the setting were different so I could have pursued the thinking of one of the daughters, but the time wasn’t right nor would it have been appropriate.

As I drove home I began to wonder what it would take to get people to think correctly about the purpose of the church ... what could I do ... say ... so that people would come to a better understanding of just what was the purpose and reason for the church. Oh, how we, the clergy, have failed in allowing people to think this way. I’ve often contemplated the damage that we as parents and clergy do to the lives of our children by “just” introducing them to the church and not to Christ. Difference would be so dynamic and world changing.

Here was the statement: “The VFW and the church are the same. They both have the same purpose ... to do good in the world.” It was sincere. I’m sure that the daughter, who was raised in the church, hadn’t fully thought through what she was saying ... or maybe she really thought that it was correct ... that the VFW and the church were the same?!? Ouch!

In the midst of this pandemic we feel it more strongly than at other times. As the institution begins to change, we feel that the rug has been pulled out from underneath us. We’ve lost that constant assurance that

things will always be the same, but the institute of the church has always been changing. The constant presence is the relationship we have with Jesus. That's the confession of Peter! That's the Rock upon which Jesus is going to build a vital living community of faith. The rock is not Peter nor the denomination nor the historical church ... but it is the life that is found only in Jesus Christ. It is he that remains our assurance especially when the world is in flux.

Yes, both institutions do desire to do "good" in this old world of ours, but there is a drastic difference as to the motivating factor to "doing those good" things. One is doing it out of a humanistic point of view. The other is doing it out of a relationship with Jesus Christ with a desire that the world would come into a relationship with Jesus Christ ... a saving relationship. It is that saving relationship that gives us peace, especially when the sand beneath our feet is shifting.

Here is my guess as to why the daughter made the statement. Her father and mother were good people. They took their daughters to church, but my guess is that they never introduced them to Jesus Christ. The church to which they were taken was a good church and had been served by a number of caring pastors (most of whom I knew). The church had numerous activities for the children and youth. It was an active and alive congregation ... BUT they simply didn't remember to "keep the main thing the main thing." And, I must confess that as a pastor myself I am as guilty as the next one for I've been there ... done that ... looked at the activities instead of helping people to build a personal relationships with Jesus Christ. I pray for God's forgiveness from my missteps.

It is vital that we remember to be committed to doing the "good" in this world ... to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison, look after the widow and orphaned ... to "do it unto the least of these". BUT, we also need to remember that as we "do" these outreach, caring ministries not to loose sight of the motivating factor namely Jesus Christ ... unless we just want to be like the VFW with very expensive buildings.

QUOTE:

[According to an August 23, 1993] 88% of Catholics and a majority of Presbyterian and Methodist evangelizers [those who actively try to share their "faith"] believe that "if people are generally good, or do enough good things for others during their lives, they will earn a place in heaven."

PRAYER:

When our attention wanders away from the relationship, Lord forgive. When the minor things of the church get in the way, Lord forgive. When we begin to think that it is all about us, Lord forgive. When our priorities shift and the institution becomes more important than the ministry, Lord forgive. When we begin to think more highly of our organization than we do of introducing people to Jesus Christ, Lord forgive. Help us become more of what we think we are and less of what we actually are.

And the faith journey continues, Pastor Jim
Jmartin450@tampabay.rr.com
386-795-5323