

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-19

Great American author Mark Twain in his book, "Life on the Mississippi," recalls the navigational instructions he received from a riverboat captain about the Mississippi River. Robert Dale summarizes:

"The captain explained that the look of the river changes constantly at night— depending on the moon-light. On clear nights, shadows hide snags and sandbars. When nights are inky and black, all shores blur into straight lines. But, on foggy and misty nights, the shores appear to have no shape at all. The possibilities seemed endless to Twain—so endless that he despaired of so many variations to master. Twain complained bitterly about the complexity of the river's conditions: 'Oh don't say any more, please? Have I got to learn five hundred thousand different ways? If I tried to carry all of that cargo in my head, it would make me stooped shouldered.' But the captain wisely quieted Twain's frustration: You only learn the shape of the river, and you learn it with such absolute certainty that you can always steer by the shape that's in your head, and never mind the one that's before your eyes." Learn the shape of the river. Steer by the lasting shape that's in your head rather than the changing perspectives before your eyes."¹

Is there a shape to the great river that is the Church? Is there some basic way to navigate Church so as to accomplish its mission in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the world? Because as I look around town, I see a ton of different methods of doing church. As I look across our own denomination, the Church of the Brethren, I see a ton of different methods for how to do church—big churches, small churches, house churches, urban churches, rural churches, ornate churches, simple churches, old order churches, modern churches, churches with lots of staff, churches with no staff, churches who challenge cultural norms, churches who play by cultural norms, patriotic churches, pacifist churches, open and affirming churches, family churches. I think you get the idea. There are a lot of different ways we do church. But is there a single shape to the river that should guide all churches?

I want to distinguish this morning between principles and particulars. Principles and particulars. Particulars change but Principles do not. Think about the Grand Canyon, have you ever seen the Grand Canyon? The canyon is 277 river miles long, up to 18 miles wide, and a mile deep. I have never physically seen the canyon, but I understand from those who have that the magnitude and beauty will simply overwhelm someone. The canyon is a great illustration of principles and particulars. What you see when you look out over the canyon's beauty is particular colors and formations and depths and size—all of these things that stun our senses are particulars. The principle of the Grand Canyon was that it was formed over the course of eons and millennia through the slow process of river eroding earth. Many scholars estimate a process that took 5-6 million years. The principle of erosion doesn't change; it lasts for eons. The particular shapes and contours are always changing.

This, also, can be seen in the church. The early church started by those first disciples looks a lot different than what you all are doing now. The first Brethren meeting in Alexander Mack's home reading scripture together looks a lot different than we do. Even the look of

¹ Dale, Robert D. Leadership for a Changing Church. Abingdon Press, 1998. p 9.

HCOB has changed in its nearly 140 years of existence. And that's okay. Particulars are supposed to change. Principles are not. The problem, as I see it, is that we are often more worried and consumed by changes in particulars rather even bothering to understand the principles.

We argue or grumble about changes in the particular. Music styles shift, dress code shifts, methods of performing the ordinances of communion or Love Feast shift, Pastors and pastoral style shift—all of these are changes to the particular. Did any of them have any effect on the Principles of the church? Did changes in music styles change the fact that the church is about proclaiming Jesus is Lord. No.

I love the text from Matthew 16:13-19. In this story, the Gospel of Matthew's focus is about to change. The Gospel to this point has been about figuring out who Jesus is and what his way is all about. The disciples especially have been getting to know him. So, he poses this question to his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And the disciples give him some answers—John the Baptist or varying prophets. Then Jesus asks them to speak for themselves and Peter speaks up saying, "You are the Messiah, Son of the living God." Ok, the story of Jesus has reached a very important point—Jesus' friends now know who he is. The disciples get the principle of this whole deal—Jesus is Lord and his Lordship changes everything.

Now as Jesus continues to speak, he's going to use a word that appears only twice in all the Gospels—here and a few chapters later in Matthew 18. That word is Church. Now is when you should have a puzzled look on your face. Only two passages of scripture in all four Gospels use the word Church. This thing that I've committed my life to working for, is referenced only by Jesus twice. Some people say it's because he wasn't out to start a new religion, some new institution; rather he wanted to reform Judaism or just show people a new way. Not a religion but a movement. Regardless, this is what Jesus said, speaking to Peter, "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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

There's a lot here, but two things I want to unpack. Jesus renames Simon to Peter which means "rock" as a way to symbolize the firmness on which the church will stand. The church won't stand on sand but rather on rock, and that footing will be so solid that not even the gates of Hades or hell can overcome it. Essentially, the church can't lose. Now, this passage has been argued for centuries concerning its implications for the Catholic Pope and the head of the Church, but that's not the point. The point is that the church sits on solid ground. The church sits on solid ground when it allows the Principle that Jesus is Lord, the Messiah, to guide its direction, rather than the particular minutia of who's the head of the church. And of course, Brethren have always said that the head of the church is Jesus.

The second point I want to draw from this passage is this issue of binding and loosing. Jesus gives Peter and the Church the "keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" and the power of binding and loosing. Does this mean the church has the power to decide who's in and who's out of heaven? No, scripture is clear that Jesus is the ultimate judge. But we do get to bind and loose issues of particular importance for our time. The Principle is clear but the particulars are not, so we get to organize the particulars keeping in mind that they will have eternal significance.

Jesus is Lord, but how we organize the Church is up to us. This is a big responsibility.

Sometimes we fall into the illusion of thinking that Jesus laid out the way the church needed to look. Jesus dictates that we need Pastors or deacons or Districts. That Jesus tells us we should worship on Sunday mornings at a special building called a church and that we should

sing songs there and listen to sermons. That Jesus tells us we need a church leadership team and specific committees and fellowship events and Vacation Bible School. These are all particulars that Jesus doesn't weigh into. How we do church is up to us. He talks about church only twice in all the gospels.

So, how should HCOB be doing church? Well, I want to highlight some particulars that you've allowed to change that have flourished. First, the Sunday@9 worship gathering. This is different—food, tables, casual music, informal style. This worship style strips away some particular structures that for some just got in the way. It has the feel of a judgment free zone. This gathering is flourishing as a place for people to connect with God and each other in a genuine life sharing manner. Let's allow the particulars to change.

Youth Club is a flourishing children's and youth ministry with incredible diversity and continues to morph and change in particularity. This ministry was once described as an outreach ministry to children in our community. Calling it an outreach ministry, however, is wrong; this is in-reach. To say outreach means these kids aren't actually a part of this church, that they are outsiders, but we get to decide the particulars of who's in and who's out and I believe they are insiders who claim us as their church family. This is a huge change in particulars. So, all of you who still defy Pastor Audrey's rule from a few years ago and say, "we have no kids," either stop talking or start showing up to the vital children's in-reach ministries of this church. Let's allow the particulars to change.

There is no one way to do church. The Grand Canyon of the church has been and is being formed by every new generation of the church. And Jesus has given us the authority to do this. So, let's stop getting in the way and start allowing the Principles shine through new particulars.

Before we move into the ordinance of communion. I must comment that this is a particular that has endured through the ages since Christ instituted this practice at his last supper. It has endured as a significant symbol pointing us to the Principle that Jesus is Lord and Jesus loves us intimately. I pray that still today, it might point you to embody this simple foundational truth as you embody the love of Jesus in your own life.