

**Date: August 23, 2020**

**Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20**

**Title: YOU ARE CALLED OUT!**

Team building retreats are designed to get people to work together, to learn a new skill, or face a new challenge. It sounds good in theory, but not all team-building exercises accomplish these purposes. The folks at Quickbase software company, asked for feedback on some of the worst team-building exercises, that actual businesses have put their employees through. One company brought in a consultant who asked all the employees to kick off a team-building meeting, by going around the conference table and sharing what they didn't like about their fellow employees. Literally within minutes, all the employees were angry or in tears.

Another person wrote about a team-building retreat at a horse farm. The goal was to improve each employee's communication skills, by having them learn to communicate with a horse. One employee nearly got trampled by one rambunctious horse?

Jesus was ahead of his time, when it came to team building. He took his disciples off from time to time for retreats, but these retreats had nothing to do with the leadership skills or learning to communicate with horses. Usually these retreats were a time for prayer or conversation about the kingdom of God.

But sometimes, Jesus took his disciples to a place outside their comfort zone. Like today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel. This unusual place was named Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was an ancient Roman city known for its worship of foreign gods. There was a sacred cave, at the entrance to Caesarea Philippi, and all around this cave were carved niches filled with small statues of the various gods worshiped there, gods like Hermes and Echo. The region was also full of pagan religious sites, many devoted to the god Pan. Pan was the half-man, half-goat god who had the ability to create a feeling of sudden and overwhelming fear in humans. It's from his name, that we get the English word *panic*.

Put yourself in the disciples' shoes. Jesus has led you to a place that makes you very uncomfortable. Everywhere you look, you see evidence of shrines and statues and inscriptions, to various pagan gods. You're confronted in every direction. And as you begin to stare at your sandals, to avoid staring at these ungodly idols, Jesus asks a strange question: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They answered, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Everyone has their own idea about Jesus. And they're all relatively positive ideas. Nothing wrong with being compared to some of Israel's greatest prophets . . . you can't do better than John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah . . . unless, you're the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The Great I AM. Then, it's a little insulting.

But Jesus doesn't correct his disciples. He just asks another question: "But what about you?" he asks. "Who do you say I am?"

This isn't Jesus making small talk. This is decision time. "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter is the only one to respond: “You’re the Messiah. The Son of the living God.” Simon Peter doesn’t realize it, but he’s just stepped through a one-way door. He’s crossed a dividing line. He has announced, that Jesus is the Anointed One, promised by God to the nation of Israel. He’s God in the flesh . . . not the image of a dead idol, but the Son of the living God.

I imagine Jesus had a huge smile on his face, when he turned to Simon and said, “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. 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.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

We like to think of Pentecost, the day that the Holy Spirit fell upon a group of Jesus’ followers, and gave them the power to do ministry in Jesus’ name, as the birthday of the Christian church. But the first time the church is mentioned in the Bible, is in today’s passage, in verse 18. Notice how Jesus announces it: “. . . on this rock I will build *my* church.” Not *the* church. Not *a* church. *My* church. This is Jesus’ church, not my church, not your church, but Jesus’ church.

The word Jesus uses for “church” is (ek les see a) *ekklesia*. That term doesn’t refer to a building. *Ekklesia* means a “called-out people.” Jesus is casting a vision for his disciples. He’s showing them, that his ministry isn’t just for this time, and this place and this people. His ministry will continue long after his death. His ministry will attract people from all over the world. His church is for all time, and for all people. Over 2,000 years ago, Jesus envisioned you and me, and billions of people, all over the world, coming together to do his work. What does it mean, to be Jesus’ called-out people? Jesus gives us some clear instructions.

**First, Jesus calls us to be a light, to the nations of the world.** Matthew 5:14-15 we read these words: “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” What does that mean to you, that we are to be the light of the world? To me it means, we are to be a living example, of what living in the kingdom of God, is all about.

According to a story in *Leadership* magazine few years ago, the city of Jackson, Mississippi, once endured a scandal among their city council members. The council president, along with another member, had been caught in an unethical situation. A number of community leaders, were brought together for a televised panel discussion, on the issue. Journalist Matt Friedman participated in the panel. At one point, the moderator asked, “Matt, whose fault is this?”

Matt savored the question for a moment. He admits that he was ready to denounce the council president, in no uncertain terms. But suddenly, another man spoke up. It was Pastor John Perkins, also a participant on the panel. And Pastor Perkins said simply, “It’s my fault.” Everyone turned to stare at this strange comment. Pastor Perkins

continued, “I have lived in this community for decades as a Bible teacher. I should have been able to create an environment where, what our council president did, would have been unthinkable, because of my efforts. You want someone to blame? I’ll take the blame. All of it.”

Pastor Perkins understood what Jesus meant when he said, “You are the light of the world.” We’re to be the embodiment of righteous living. We’re to be the example of what living in the kingdom of God is all about. “Let your light shine before others,” said Jesus, “that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Jesus calls us to be a light, to the nations of the world.

**Jesus also calls us to be a community of love.** *Ekklesia* is a plural word. Once you become a follower of Christ, you’re one in heart, mind and spirit, with every other follower of Christ, all over the world, throughout time and history.

We can’t follow Christ, and look out for our own self-interest. We can’t follow Christ, and look down on a fellow believer. We’re a community, that spans more than 2,000 years of history, and covers every nation, every skin color, every language, every nationality, and every social class on earth. And Jesus’ last prayer, before his arrest and crucifixion, was that we would all be one, one in heart, one in mind, one in spirit, one in love.

In December 2019, a five-year-old boy named Michael was adopted out of the foster care system in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Michael’s adoption was extraordinary. When Michael’s foster parents told his kindergarten teacher, that the adoption hearing was coming up, the kindergarten teacher arranged for every child in Michael’s class to attend the hearing, and show their support for Michael.

Michael’s foster parents said the kids in his kindergarten class had been exceptionally kind and welcoming toward him from the very first day. They loved him. So, it was only appropriate that on Michael’s special day, they all showed up. Imagine the judge’s surprise, when she entered the courtroom for a standard adoption hearing, and saw 39 five-year-olds waving red paper hearts, in support of Michael. The judge even took the time, to ask the children to share, what Michael meant to them.

When you became a follower of Jesus, you were adopted into the church, the called-out people. You are no longer alone. You have a family who shares your joys and your heartaches. We belong to Jesus and we belong to each other. That’s what it means to be the church. Jesus calls us to be a light for the nations. He also calls us to be a community of love.

**And finally, Jesus calls us to reach out to those who, don’t know him.** Look again at Jesus’ words in verse 18: “. . . and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Jesus is building the church through us. Isn’t that a mind-blowing thought? Two thousand years ago, Jesus had a vision of people all over the world, people just like you and me, joining together in prayer and Bible study and worship, going out to minister to the hurting and the needy in our communities, and loving each other with a sacrificial love, that’s so contagious, that it draws others, to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Francis Chan, the author of the book *Crazy Love*, visited church congregations around the world and studied what passionate, committed, courageous Christian faith looks like. He told of his conversation with a Chinese pastor who served the underground church in China. For most of the last century the church in China was forced to exist in secret cells because of state persecution. Amazingly this did not hinder the church's growth.

This pastor said that the persecution faced by the underground church forced them to focus on Jesus' mission even more. He stated that the underground Chinese church is built on five pillars. You might be interested to know what these pillars were: studying the word of God, devotion to prayer, the expectation that every single believer would share their faith in Jesus with others, regular expectation of miracles, and embracing suffering for the glory of Christ. That's not a formula that you would think would be all that attractive, particularly the part about suffering. And yet, it's estimated that there are currently 100 million Christians in China. The so-called underground church accomplished amazing feats in Jesus' name.

“. . . and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” That's a promise Jesus made over 2,000 years ago. The gates of hell will not overcome the church. Jesus is still building his church, his called-out people, and not even the gates of hell, can stand against us. We look at churches that are dying and conclude that the battle is being lost. Not so! There are more people serving Christ around the world than ever before in human history. Many are still being persecuted. Many are still practicing their faith underground, but the church of Jesus Christ is still a battering ram against the gates of Hades.

You and I have been “called out.” Called out to be a light for the nations of the world; called out to be a community of love; called out to reach out to those who don't know him. Wouldn't you like to be part of a movement that, is that exciting? Hopefully you already are. If not, today is a good time to make the decision to join Jesus' winning team and then Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.