

**“Rock ‘n Roll”**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**  
**August 23, 2020**

*Jesus pauses in his travels to poll his disciples. Who do people say he is? A prophet? A resurrected John the Baptist? With his questions, he is testing Peter and the other disciples. In this critical passage from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus turns the keys to heaven over to the people, inviting us into direct relationship with God, inviting us also to answer for ourselves who Jesus is in our lives and how we can be the rock on which his church is built.*

*Matthew 16:13-20. Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church:*

When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” He pressed them, “And how about you? Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter said, “You’re the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

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.

“And that’s not all. You will have complete and free access to God’s kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven.”

He swore the disciples to secrecy. He made them promise they would tell no one that he was the Messiah.

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

This past week, your Strategic Planning Team asked in a survey your opinions on the essentials of our worship and community life at UCC Parker

Hilltop. You were asked a variety of questions about what makes us a church, a church family, and a worshipping church family. From these responses, the Team expects to report back on the feelings of the congregation about resuming in-person worship and/or social activities.

We already know the responses will span the range of possibility, from “I want to resume in-person worship immediately” on the one end of the spectrum to, “I don’t care if we ever go back into the building—I like Zoom worship” on the other end. Some responses will be in the nature of lament: “I wish we could go back to normal (i.e. the way it was before the virus), but I know it is not safe yet, so in the meantime, I am grateful we have Zoom worship.” Other responses will be spoken with joy and gratefulness: “Finally! I can worship with my church family! I couldn’t often—or ever-- come to church when we were in the building, and now I can come every week, and I know who people are, because I get to see their names and faces together on the screen.”

This week’s scripture passage comes at an opportune time. This, the scheduled lectionary passage now 5 full months into online worship, asks us critical questions as a church. We initially were forced online due to the virus, but I daresay we were coaxed at the same time by the Holy Spirit into a new way of defining ourselves as the UCCPH Body of Christ.

Jesus pauses in Chapter 16 of Matthew’s Gospel to survey his disciples. His Survey Monkey questions were three:

1. What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?
2. And what about you?
3. Who do you say that I am?

We commonly assume that Jesus understands his mission statement from the get-go. We are led to believe that once Jesus goes on his wilderness journey and survives the three temptations visited on him by the Devil, his purpose is

then made clear in his mind and heart. When he reemerges into society and is baptized with God's Holy Spirit, he chooses his disciples and sets out into the crowds. Teaching the people, healing the sick and disenfranchised, he goads the Pharisees into declaring him as a heretic, an enemy of the Jewish faith. Jesus questions the very lynchpin of what it means to be righteous in the eyes of God. So why does he ask the disciples what others think of him? If he knows his purpose and path, why does he care what other people say? What is he hoping to learn with his survey?

I am curious what the Strategic Planning Team will learn from their polling. What are people saying about who we are as UCC Parker Hilltop church?

In our Wednesday Chat this week, several persons in our church community held a lively discussion about what we should rename our Thursday church email newsletter. It has carried the *very* creative name, "Church Thursday Email," for some time now. Boring. Meredith has spiced up the weekly news email for us! Don't tell her I said so, but I think she is having fun being creative with it. Clearly, we need a new name for this publication.

After discussing several suggestions, the informal, organic online chat group settled on "Our PHC: Parker Hilltop Cares." As we spoke this name, it grew on us. The UCCPH newsletter is *ours*. We are a unique congregation. Our WHY and our progressive ministry with traditional flair makes us one-of-a-kind in the Arapahoe-Douglas-Elbert Counties community. We are proud of what we stand for, even as we are humbled by the yoke it places on us to live into what we say we are, the embodiment to others of God's unconditional love. This is how we want to be known.

"PHC." It rolls off the tongue as an acronym easier and prettier than "Thursday email," no doubt. But as an acronym, it stands also for us as the foundational rock on which we are built. We are Parker Hilltop. We are a success

story of re-unity in a world of divisiveness. We are a symbol of what the Body of Christ can accomplish in the combined efforts of individual Christians who are more interested in community than polity, in congregational health rather than self-proclaimed rightness that invariably leads to destructive ministry relationships. Our church family is interested in moving forward, not content to fall on the sword of stagnation.

The discussion group felt that “Parker Hilltop” needed to be in the title of the weekly e-blast. And we needed an action word in there, too, because we *are* a community in motion and in fellowship.

We *care*. We care about our church. Some of us are caring for the church building directly; others are longing and praying to find a way to soon congregate there safely. But we have all seen firsthand that the church- the foundational rock- does not depend on a building for its ministry.

Missing the sanctuary as we all do: its beauty and quiet a worshipful and spiritually secure place—we are, nevertheless, a united congregation coming together from our home offices and family rooms, hotels and vacation homes. We join in from cellphones plugged into table outlets in Starbucks, and sometimes we playback the worship services and special slide shows, or read the sermons from the comfort and quiet of bed on weekday nights. Anywhere we are, there also is UCC Parker Hilltop; there also is our rock, the church. The building is simply *not* what defines us.

“*Care*” defines us. We care about God and we care about others, looking for opportunities to invite newcomers to worship, study and socialize with us. We care about what the Spirit is saying to us about our future and we are listening for direction. Painful as these pandemic and unsettled times are, yet they are full of promise that *God. is. with. us.* God is still speaking in unconditional love

language for the Creation; hence, we *care* deeply about our WHY and about getting the Good News of that limitless love out to ears that need to hear it.

We care for *each other*. At 9:30 on Sundays, we jump on the Zoom and greet our church family. At roughly 10:05 am, we help our youngsters stay engaged with the congregation and with God's work and love for their lives. Right after Time with the Next Generation, we care for each other during Joys & Concerns. In all my conversations with you, it has been affirmed that live, interactive worship is what you want. We could pre-record the whole service and stream it like a TV show, but most of you have experienced that by now and have overwhelmingly said thanks but no thanks to that.

UCC Parker Hilltop *cares*. Jesus, the foundation of our Christian faith, asks his congregants, "Who do you say that I am?" Is he interested in constructing or acquiring a building? Of course, not—he never has one, not ever. He is out and about amongst the people on Gallery View, just like on our Zoom feed, for all to see and experience.

Does he require or operate from an Order of Worship? No. He has a rough agenda, and many times he follows it, but he also allows the Spirit to move him off his dead-centeredness, like when the Samaritan Woman at the well confronts him and his ingrown prejudice against her race, or when the widow demands his attention at least as much as a dog gets the table scraps, or when the Roman centurion asks him to break down the walls of his religious borders and heal his servant.

We are more comfortable with a Sunday plan and an Order of Worship, but we should always be willing to go where Spirit calls. We have done that already by bucking fundamentalist tradition and becoming Open, Affirming, and Fully Inclusive of all persons regardless of how they identify themselves or who they love. We have come a long way in this regard, but we have so much more

work to do in our ministry with marginalized persons! We have spent time, effort and money to be as Accessible to All as the building would allow, but despite our best efforts, still some were excluded.

The virus hit. Along with physically and geographically distanced persons, abled and nearby parishioners and ministry staff have been excluded from coming to our physical church. But Spirit is at work. Zoom engineers are diligently trying to make their product work well for churches. Pastor, worship designers, musicians, singers, church leaders and financial officers were at the ready such that we didn't miss even one week before we were online. Who would have guessed at those who we now welcome and *welcome back* to worship, the Film Series, Book Study and Adult Education, chat rooms and other opportunities for connection?

Parker Hilltop Cares.

“So, what about you?” Jesus surveys his stressed-out disciples to find out where their faith lies because he *cares*. He cares about his congregation. He cares for the state of their souls; he is curious about how God-Alive is showing up for them.

What about you? Just as Jesus cares for his faith family, I care how you are doing in these Perfect Storm times. I ask you the question in various ways each week about how you are faring. Some of you answer me right away, but most of you don't answer at all, and so I worry about you. Think about that next time I ask the question, and know that I care and will personally and privately answer you.

Let me ask you these questions this morning: **How are you feeling right now about being in worship with your church family?** Feel free during the sermon or during the following reflection music to use your chat box at the bottom of your screen and let us know.

**Who do you say that we are?** Again, I invite you to use your chat box to express what our church means to you and to the community where we live. What might it mean to those we have yet to welcome? Julie and I will use your words to form the Benediction today in a special, visual way.

Jesus calls Peter the rock on which the church will be built. That's us, my siblings. We are today's Peter. *We* are the rock. We were called for just this time. We are foundational for the new expression of Christianity, one that transcends our old trappings of security and sameness. This is our faith-in-action, embracing this new thing that Spirit is creating in us and for us, creating it out of divine care and in response to an urgent need to get the Good News of God's unconditional love into the world.

Peter follows Jesus' example, not spending his time with bricks and mortar and church buildings. He doesn't build *any* structures for people to worship in. Matthew is writing after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, yet he calls not for the buildings to be rebuilt, but to be *reimagined* as the mobile, variable, heart-housed Body of Christ. Peter is to take the Good News out to the people, where the people are. The Rock. The Foundation on which the church was built is entirely metaphorical, not literal.

There are, as Jesus promises, no more boundaries between heaven and earth. Through Peter, a dedicated but common individual, Jesus assures us that we are all called to be his disciples. We all are welcomed into that divine presence that to mere mortals was previously off-limits, to a vision and version of heaven that is immediate, tangible, and available to absolutely everyone, absolutely everyone, right here, right now. The early church got it wrong when it walled the people off from the Word. It is incumbent on us to heed what Jesus said to Peter and modeled for him, and to in turn, model it in our own lives of faith and service.

In his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, Donald Miller paints a word picture of heaven-on-earth and earth-in-heaven that I find very comforting and at the same time stimulating:

I wonder if what we'll do with God when we are through with all this, is [God'll] show us around heaven, all the light coming in through windows a thousand miles away, all the fields sweeping down to a couple of chairs under a tree, in a field outside the city. And we'll sit and tell [God] our stories, and [God'll] smile and tell us what they mean. I just hope I have something to say.

I just hope we'll have something to say. When there is no longer a thin veil between our earthly experience and our existence beyond our physical life, I hope our stories will be of how we rose to our challenges. I hope we tell of how we recognized our opportunities to co-create with Spirit something new as Parker Hilltop church, and then answered God's call for innovation and extravagant welcome. Parker Hilltop Cares. That's us.

Poets speak our Longing while our young ones look to us for direction and reassurance. Jesus sends us forth—not back inside our sanctuary's four walls, not yet-- to be the church out in the world, the rock, the foundation, the congregational family that *cares*.

*May It Be So.*

Donations to our church gratefully accepted:

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