

Church With a Capital C

Proper 16, Year A, RCL. Matthew 16:13-20. The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. August 21, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The church is not a thing the way this building is a thing. That is to say, it is not a physical construction. It is a social construction, a community of common allegiance and common purpose. The most serious routine error we fall into as Christians is misunderstanding the building for the life that it fosters—mistaking the steeple for the people, so to speak.

Now, you're thinking, that's silly. Five seconds of low-energy reflective thought will tell anyone with a lick of sense that when we call this building "the church" or "a church" we're speaking symbolically. This is obviously the headquarters building for the local branch of the organization, so we can speak of it the way we say the White House when we mean the people who make up the executive branch of the Federal government—the people and the way they function, the way they are organized and interact with one another and with other groups. So of course we aren't so dumb that we think this pile of assorted construction materials is THE church, the one Jesus was talking about when he said to Peter, "You are the rock on which I will build my church." We heard Jesus say that in today's Gospel reading.

Problem is...it's easier to maintain a building than it is to maintain a social organization. All you need is money to keep a building going. To keep a social organization going you need heart. When the heart stops beating...you can keep throwing money at the brick and mortar till there isn't any more money. Then the building turns into something else. It is no longer the headquarters for a vigorous local branch of the Kingdom of God on Earth. It gets "repurposed". I've seen churches become quite lovely architect's offices, or restaurants, or become the local headquarters of a different branch of the Kingdom. Or of a different religious group altogether.

But there I go again! I did it—I said "I've seen churches become restaurants." But THE church, the Church with a capital C, can not turn into anything else. Because it is founded on Jesus, by Jesus, through Jesus. Jesus laid that cornerstone (difficult as the role of cornerstone was for Peter, at first). And Jesus laid that cornerstone on the foundation of his own life—his

birth, his ministry, his resurrection, his ongoing presence through the Holy Spirit, and his promise to return again.

You can't "repurpose" Jesus Christ. He is who he is, and his intentions are what they are. We get to celebrate him and his intentions by living up to his character and his plans as best we can. And we don't need this building to do that—though it certainly helps. But it does *not* help if we confuse maintaining a building with maintaining a community. The only way—the ONLY way—a Christian community is maintained is through evangelism. Which doesn't mean buttonholing people and clobbering them with the Bible. It means inviting them to share our life and offering them opportunities to develop faith in God the way the Gospel of God's Kingdom presents it. This means we evangelize not only people who are strangers till God puts them in our path, but also our own children. No one is born a Christian, though some are born into a richer broth of faith than others.

This is a fancy way of saying we can't count on physical reproduction to keep the church alive. Sure, the Roman Catholics out-reproduce us Anglicans (at least in this country) and the Pentecostals (in most countries) out-invite just about every other branch of the Church-with-a-capital-C. But we offer an attractive approach to Bible-based worship (and our liturgy *is* drenched in the Bible) and our teaching is scriptural, reasonable, and traditional. There's a lot to like here—and yes, the facilities are good too.

There is a lot to like here—in the heart—if we live the wonder, love and praise that is Jesus' heartbeat in our community. I'm glad we have this lovely place to meet in and do what Christians do. But it is the doing that makes the Church. That makes the Church attractive. That makes it alive.

What are you doing...what am I doing...what are we doing...what are we going to do *this week*, to show the love of Christ for the life of the world, to demonstrate what, why and who the Church really is?