

Why I love the church: the future is promising

Message for Sunday, February 24, 2019

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-21

Children's Message:

God is wonderful! We have so many reasons to rejoice and give thanks. Let's sing "Halle, Halle, Hallelujah" after each bit of good news I tell you.

- Jesus was born at Christmas.
- Jesus chose a few people to be his special friends, so he could teach them to be his disciples.
- Some important people didn't like Jesus and told him, "Boy, you'd better stop that, or there's going to be trouble," but Jesus kept on doing God's work.
- These important people killed Jesus, but even as they were doing it, Jesus said he forgave them.
- On Easter morning, an angel told Jesus' friends, "Do not be afraid. Jesus has risen. He is alive again."
- Jesus still lives with us today.

Message "Why I love the church: the future is promising"

1) Are things looking up or looking down?

One of the greatest moments in basketball history was in 1995. It was the NBA playoffs. The Indiana Pacers were playing the New York Knicks. The game was almost over—just 19 seconds left on the clock, and the score was 105-99 with New York in the lead.

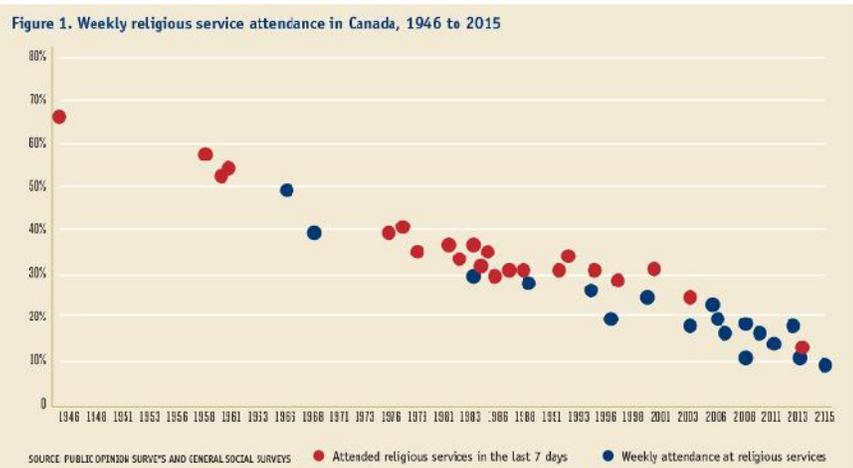
In a typical NBA game, a team will have 100 points, over the 48 minutes of the game. Let's round that off to 50 minutes. So that works to about 2 points per minute, for each team. That makes sense, because you have to run with the ball all the way down the court, make it through the defence, and put the ball in the basket. On average, each team does that about once per minute.

So when you're behind by six points with just 19 seconds left... yeah, it's pretty well over. But Reggie Miller never learned that. He scored eight points in nine seconds, and Indiana won. Here's

what happened: a teammate passed the ball to Reggie at the three point line. He took a shot, and it went in. The other team gets possession of the ball, and throw it from their end of the court. But Reggie intercepts the pass, steps outside the three point line, and sinks another one. Two shots, six points, and the game is now tied. They stop the clock each time play stops.

On that last play, one of the New York players got fouled, and he gets two free throws from the foul line. An easy two points to win the game. He misses both of them. After the second free throw, Reggie leaps in the air and gets the rebound, but before he can shoot, he gets fouled. He gets two free throws, and sinks them both. Nine seconds, eight points, just like that. New York isn't able to score in the remaining ten seconds, and the game is over. The Indiana fans are elated; New York fans are deflated.

When we look at how the Church of Jesus Christ is doing, it can look pretty dismal, like the game is pretty well over. Back in 1946, about 68% of Canadians were part of a church service at least once a week. Some of you remember those days, when the churches were full, when there were more people in Junior Church than our entire congregation today. Church attendance now is less than 10% of the population.



What hope is there for the church of Jesus Christ? What hope is there for St. Paul's Church? This is not idle talk: it is a crucial question for most of us. Investors buy stocks in a company hoping for a prosperous future. A person starts a new job, hoping that the company isn't going to go out of business in a few years. As Christians, we have the same hopes for our church. We want it to thrive.

Some signs indicate that the church is declining; some reveal that the church is on the way up. When autumn arrives a tree drops its leaves. In spring the leaves grow back. The tree's future is not revealed in these seasonal changes, but in the health and strength hidden from view within its trunk and in the roots underground. Likewise, the prospects for the church are not found in cultural trends or in the opinions of the cynics. The future of the church is found in Jesus Christ and his resurrection.

2) The future of the church is guaranteed in Jesus Christ

A few weeks before Jesus came to Jerusalem for the last time, where he was going to be killed, he took the disciples on a spiritual retreat. He was handing over to them the responsibility for carrying on his mission, but were they ready? Did they even know who he was?

So Jesus took them to the far north of Israel, near the city of Caesarea Philippi. Even though they were still in Jewish Israel, this was a hotbed of other religions. In the region around there were 14 temples dedicated to Baal, a pagan god. Legend had it that the Pan, the Greek god of fertility was born here. The dominant landmark was a huge temple of glistening white marble dedicated to the worship of Caesar, the Roman emperor. It's in this setting that Jesus asks who they believe he is.

Matthew 16:13-16, New International Version:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Right in the heart of that pagan god territory, Jesus is proclaimed to be the Son of the one true living God.

Jesus accepts what Peter said, and then adds to it:

Matthew 16:17-18, New Living Translation:

Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to

you. You did not learn this from any human being. Now I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."

Jesus says that he himself will build the church. He's not going to subcontract it out—who knows what you'll get! The future of the church is guaranteed by Jesus Christ himself. This is a promise.

3) The guarantee was proven at Easter

Matthew 16:18, New International Version:

"...and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."

Well, they sure tried. And they thought they'd won, on that terrible Friday. But when Jesus rose from death, he showed that his guarantee was solid.

Sears went bankrupt a couple of years ago. How would you feel if you bought major appliances from Sears just before they announced they were closing. What good is a warranty if the company disappears? The warranty of the church is secured in the life of Jesus Christ.

4) We hold the keys to the kingdom

As good as the resurrection of Jesus Christ is, there is more to the future of the church. Jesus gave the keys of the Kingdom to his followers.

Matthew 16:19, New International Version:

"And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven, and whatever you open on earth will be opened in heaven."

A key is a sign of ownership. Our friends and neighbours do not have keys to our house; they come in only when we open the door and welcome them in. Peter and the apostles opened the door of faith, first of all at Pentecost to other Jews (Acts 2), but later to all people who believed in Jesus (Acts 10-11). Jesus will build his church, but he gives us the keys, and wants us to accept an ownership role, to open the door to the Kingdom for others to come in.

When you go to a store, you are a customer, not an owner. You don't hold the key to the store; you just go in when they're open, buy what you need, and

leave. What about your church? Is this church your home, and you hold a key? Or do you treat your church like a store that you use when you need it, but you don't have any ownership in it? The future of the church is bright when you, along with the rest of the congregation, say, "This is my church. I hold one of the keys to its future."

5) Our church's future depends on both Jesus and us

The future of the church is dependent upon Jesus' Easter guarantee, and upon you holding a key. Both are vital.

I have heard of churches that were virtually dead which have been resurrected. These are churches that had no life left in them; all that was needed was to bury them and forget them. Then along comes someone who believes in the Easter promise of Jesus. Other people catch the vision of new life, and they take a key of ownership. Time and again I have heard this same story, from Canada and from around the world.

The great artist Michelangelo had finished one of his masterpiece sculptures, and the art critics came by to judge his work. They marveled at the figure of the young man. The story goes that one of them said in awe, "You have indeed produced your masterpiece. It is perfect, lacking only one thing." The great artist was dismayed, and demanded to know where he had failed. "You cannot correct it," the critic admitted. "Your work is humanly perfect; all it lacks is life."

We do all that is humanly possible; that is our part. We also need the resurrection power that Jesus Christ gives. He promised to give that new life to all who follow him:

John 11:25-26, New Living Translation:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish."

That life is also the life of our church. We praise and thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Thank Jesus for the Church. It's not perfect—far from it!—but it's the community where we grow in faith and love and service.
- Belong: "This is my church, my family. I want to do my part."
- Serve: Your ministry can include things around the St. Paul's building, but much more: your service in the community, on the job, just being a good neighbour.

Prayer

Jesus, we bow before you in prayer.

You did some amazing things during your life on earth. But what if you came into my life today? Now that would be *really* amazing!

I have some doubts, some questions... but I also have faith. I believe in you, Jesus. I believe you can do what you said. I believe your Easter promise.

So I'm asking you to do it: come into my life, my heart.

Forgive me for my sins. Make me clean and whole once again.

Fill me with your Holy Spirit, so that I may follow you and obey you always. I want to be one of your keys in your church. Thank-you, Lord. Amen.