

This morning we are going to walk through one of the greatest and most significant texts in the entire Bible – which is also one of the most crucial and highly controversial passages in the New Testament. It is so because it reveals vital truths about Jesus, and about his expectations for those who claim to be his followers, and about the purpose and the power of his church – which is to be his presence on earth. In our text for today we are, in a sense, going back to our roots as followers of Jesus Christ. Scholar and theologian James Montgomery Boice called this portion of Matthew 16 “the central or critical chapter in Matthew's account of [Jesus'] life, death and resurrection - and the high point in Jesus' teaching and the disciples' growth in spiritual understanding.” Needless to say, the very words of Jesus that we are looking at today in God’s Word speak of our desperate need for God and God’s gracious response to our need; and of Jesus’ expectations regarding how we respond to who Jesus truly is and what Jesus has sacrificially done for us – so we might humbly and sacrificially live ours for Jesus in and through the church, the spiritual and physical presence and power of Jesus on earth. I pray when we leave here today, we will not only know the vital truths about Jesus, but we will also more passionately follow him.

Remember that Jesus is in the midst of “withdrawing” himself from his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing – so he could begin his journey towards ultimately sacrificially fulfilling the purpose of his life on cross, as the long-promised Savior, who would redeem and restore fallen humanity back to the relationship with God we were created for. Last week, in Matthew 16:1-12, we followed Jesus as he was opposed and confronted by the religious leaders of the day who questioned and attacked him so they might discredit and destroy him. After Jesus had put them off, he warned his disciples not to buy into beliefs and attitudes of the Pharisees and Sadducees, telling them self-righteousness and self-indulgence such as theirs will blind them from truly seeing and knowing Jesus. Last week we learned that when we focus on the temporal matters of this world, we become blind to the spiritual realities of the Kingdom of God – and our calling in Christ to focus on what matters for all of eternity by fixing our eyes on Jesus!

Our text opens with Jesus and his disciples continuing to travel the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Matthew 16:13-14

As Jesus and his disciples travel away from the opposition and confrontation they had experienced from those who refused to believe that he was the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus asked his disciples: “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” The disciples tell him that people have various opinions. It seems that most believed that Jesus was someone special, but they did not know who that might be, their best guess being one of the prophets of old risen back to life. While they could not deny that what Jesus did was supernatural - his signs, wonders and miracles did not convince the people that Jesus was the Messiah.

People are still that way today. Philosophers revere Jesus as a great thinker. Ethicists call him the great moral example. Liberal religionists say he is the model of how we should live. Even some atheists have proclaimed Jesus as the “greatest among the sons of men.” Rock stars have sung that Jesus Christ is the “superstar,” but in every case the pronouncements of these people are far below who Jesus really is. In our day, we are faced with the promotion of the “myth of Jesus” declaring that there never was a Jesus. None of this should surprise us. In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 Paul writes: “*If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*” If the people in Jesus’ time who were firsthand witnesses of miracle after miracle, present to learn from the greatest teacher of all time, experienced his love and compassion, and yet they did not believe who he was - many today will not either. People do not believe who Jesus is because their minds are blinded to the truth by the god of this world, who distracts us with matters of this world, blinding us to the Kingdom of God.

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Matthew 16:15-17

Here Jesus makes his question more personal. Yes, he wanted to know what the people were thinking, but even more Jesus wanted to know what the disciples believed. And so Jesus asks them, *"But who do you say that I am?"* Peter steps up first and affirms that Jesus is the *"Christ."* The word *"Christ"* means "the Anointed One" - in that he is the One set apart by God and marked-out for a unique purpose. In this case he is "the Messiah" - the promised King of the Jews, the fulfillment of the promises of the Scriptures. But Peter confesses that Jesus is more than the *"Christ"* - the promised Messiah and he affirms Jesus's divine nature by professing Jesus' human title: *"You are the Chris"* and also *"the Son of the living God!"* To designate God as the *"living God"* is to distinguish Him from all the false gods that men have made for themselves - gods which are not living, and which are not gods at all. Our God is *"the living God"* - the One Sovereign God who created the universe and all things, and gives life to all.

Notice when Jesus asked the question, *"But who do you say that I am?"* - he asked it of the disciples as a whole. But the answer was given by an *individual* - Peter. We often find Peter stepping forward in the Bible, and responding before any of the other disciples could do so. But I would suggest that in this case Peter's personal response was intentional, in that by the Holy Spirit's leading just one man, one individual, answered Jesus' question - by expressing his personal confession that Jesus was *"the Christ, the Son of the living God"* in front of the group. You see we are not saved as a group. Each one of us is called to *individually* confess our faith in Jesus Christ when we surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Romans 10:9 tells us: *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* In Acts 1:8 Jesus said: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."* Jesus is *"the Christ, the Son of the living God!"*

"And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.'" Here Jesus is declaring the truth that human wisdom cannot understand the things of God. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." In Isaiah 55:8-9 the prophet proclaimed: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Previously, in Matthew 11:27, we read that Jesus said: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

What Jesus is saying to Peter - and to all of us - is that we do not come to faith in Jesus Christ because of anything arising out of humanity. It was because Jesus' Father, who is in heaven, revealed it to Simon (Peter) - and for that reason Simon (Peter) was *"Blessed!"* And so are all those to whom the Father reveals *"the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"* Salvation does not come by human means or efforts or decisions. In John 1:12-13 we read that those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, those who have *"received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . . were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."* Human wisdom is foolishness before our most Sovereign God. Humanity's self-efforts at being righteous only leave Jesus in the filthy rags of sin. Salvation comes to those who respond to the revelation that God gives them concerning Himself and His Son. It comes to those who seek out God's wisdom rather than human wisdom, God's righteousness rather than self-righteousness, and mercy and grace and the forgiveness of sins rather than a demand for rights, privilege, entitlement or favors. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* In Christ, we are saved only by the will of God and by God's grace!

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Matthew 16:18

Jesus’ affirmation of Peter’s confession of faith continues here. This verse has become a point of controversy, but one that is not really that difficult to understand. Jesus continues and says, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”* Earlier Jesus had called Peter by His given name which was *“Simon Bar (son of) Jonah.”* Now Jesus calls the man by the name we have come to know as *“Peter”* - which means *“stone/rock.”* Jesus then says *“on this rock . . . I will build my church.”* The question that has become such a point of debate is to whom, or what, does *“on this rock”* refer?

“This rock” has been variously interpreted as referring to Peter himself or Peter’s confession of faith or Jesus Christ and his teachings. The Roman Catholic Church has interpreted *“this rock”* as Peter himself - and linking this with verse 19, which speaks of the authority of the church, they also claim that Peter was the first Pope. But the argument for this position and authority is not supported in the Bible. And so we, as Protestant evangelicals, who are a people whose faith in Jesus is based on the writings of God’s Word, believe the *“rock”* Jesus was talking about is *Peter’s confession of faith* that Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God!”* - *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”*

Jesus’ statement did not mean that Peter would have greater authority than the other apostles, nor did it mean that he would be infallible in his teaching, nor did it imply anything about a special office for Peter or successors to such an office. Throughout the first half of the book of Acts, Peter appears as the spokesman and leader of the Jerusalem church, but he was still sent by other apostles to Samaria and he had to give an account of his actions to the Jerusalem church. Peter is presented as having only one voice at the Jerusalem council and James has the decisive final word. And, though Peter certainly has a central role in the establishment of the church, he disappears from the Acts narrative after Acts 15.

The *“rock”* Jesus spoke is the *“rock”* of the foundational truth of our faith, that Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God!”* 1 Corinthians 3:11 says: *“No one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ”* and Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus, *“is the head of the body, the church.”* The reality of all of this, is that the emphasis in verse 18 is not on Peter or even upon the rock, but upon the builder of the church: *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”* Peter and the church would be nothing without Jesus. Tragically there are many churches around now that are nothing because they have removed the builder of the church from their faith and their building.

Jesus that builds the church. Not Peter. Not the Apostles. Not any denomination. Not the pastor. Not the elders and deacons. Not the members and people in the church. Now that does not mean that Jesus doesn’t use those people to build the church. The church could not be built without them. And so what is our part in *building* the church? We are simply *“the materials”* out of which Jesus builds his church. Our value only becomes apparent when Jesus puts us into his church where he wants us. Consider the materials that make up the building we are in: wood, concrete, brick, block, plaster, metals of various sorts, fabric, and carpeting. How valuable are any of those things until they are assembled together by the builders? We become valuable when Jesus bends us and shapes us and forms us and molds us into something for a particular function that will serve him and glorify him in his church. And take note that Jesus said: *“I will build MY church!”* The church is Jesus’ church. Not mine, not yours, not ours – Jesus! Peter was useful to Jesus as a rock in building his church because Peter yielded himself to be used in building Jesus’ church as Jesus saw fit. In his case he was a foundation stone on which other parts of the church would be built. But each and every brick has its part. This is why Peter himself uses the building analogy to describe the church in 1 Peter 2:4-5: *“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* Jesus will use us to build his church when we humbly and sacrificially offer ourselves to be used as he Jesus’ sees fit.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” While Jesus promised to build his church; but he doesn't promise that his building program would be carried on without opposition. Jesus' words imply that the church that Jesus promises to build will be under threat from *“the gates of hell.”* The purpose of *“gates”* are twofold – they are either meant to keep something *“out”* that wants to get in or they are meant to keep something *“in”* that wants to get *“out.”* And surely the forces of darkness and evil seeks to hinder the church in both of those two ways.

The enemy of humanity—the devil—seeks tirelessly to oppose the plan and purpose of God to redeem fallen people through the gospel of Jesus Christ. He seeks to prevent any of those who are separated from God from being delivered from the kingdom of darkness. And so, as an *offensive* measure, satan uses the *“gates of hell”* to *keep the lost inside* the kingdom of darkness, where evil has taken occupation and holding people as prisoners through the fear of death and the snares of sin. And the enemy of our soul also, as a *defensive* measure, uses the *“gates of hell”* to *keep the gospel outside* of the kingdom of darkness, preventing the gospel from setting any of its prisoners free. The apostle Paul spoke of this.

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:10-12

“I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Jesus affirms His Sovereign Omnipotent power as God in that, because he is the one who will build His church *“the gates of hell”* will *“not prevail”* against His church. Satan, evil, the flesh, the world will try to overcome the church. And even when the church truly serves the purpose and plan of God to disciple followers of Jesus, the *“gates of hell”* is allowed at times, to appear be making progress against the church. But it will never ultimately prevail! In John 16:33 Jesus told us: *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* The apostle Paul tasted that opposition more than almost any human being that ever lived. Even so, he passionately affirmed Jesus' declaration that the cosmic powers over the darkness and the spiritual forces of evil will not prevail against the church when he wrote:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:31-39

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Matthew 18:19

Here Jesus defines the authority of the church. He tells us that he has given us the *“keys of the kingdom of heaven.”* What are *“the keys to the kingdom”*? Other uses of the idea of having keys in the Bible indicate that this refers to having *“the power to admit or refuse a person admittance into heaven.”* How does the church do that? *By the proclamation of the gospel!* Peter took the lead in doing just that in the first part of Acts, but all the apostles joined in doing the same thing. The gospel opens the door of heaven to those who will hear and respond, but it closes the door to those who reject its message.

The issue of *binding* and *loosing* has nothing to do with Satan and demons. The *binding* and *loosing* deal with “*whatever*” not “*whoever*.” Binding and loosing are terms used by rabbis meaning *forbidding and permitting*. This is an issue of the church being able to discipline those within it and this will become even more clear when we get to Matthew 18 and its context. Shortly after his resurrection Jesus told his disciples: “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” - and then he said: “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.*” Peter, and later the other apostles and the church, are given authority to examine the Scriptures and examine a person’s life and determine whether they are in sin or not and whether they are repentant or not. This judgment is not arbitrary, but based upon the Scriptures themselves. We will cover this issue in depth when we reach Matthew 18. Jesus is telling us here the church does have authority to discipline those that profess to be Christians.

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Matthew 16:20

Matthew records that after Jesus poured the foundation of the church and then empowered the church – he warns his disciples not to tell anyone that he was “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” Why? Well, the crowds who were following him were looking for a Messiah, a Savior, to bring about a political kingdom of the world, rather than a spiritual Kingdom of God. Jesus himself would make the public announcement that that he was “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*” But He would not do it now, but rather at the proper time in keeping with God’s perfect purpose and plan for the salvation of our souls.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Matthew 16:21

The phrase here, “*from that time,*” marks another change in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus had alluded to his coming death before, but now he speaks of it clearly, and he does not just tell the disciples once, but number times. Matthew records Jesus speaking of his coming suffering, death and resurrection here and then four more times before he even reaches Jerusalem. Now we are not really sure how much time it would take him to reach Jerusalem, but we do know that he used that time to teach his disciples (and us) what he expects them (and us) - when we surrender our hearts and our lives to him as our Lord and Savior – both as individuals and as the church as a whole. In the words before us Jesus calls us to a new powerful transformed life of joy and peace in Jesus that is ours when we embrace his cross of death.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Matthew 16:22-23

Even though he confessed Jesus to be “*the Christ, the Son of the Living God*” – Peter rebukes Jesus for telling them that he would go to “*Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” This does reveal the human aspect of Jesus’ life and his relationship with Peter. His rebuke sprang out of Peter’s love, his friendship, his confusion, and his pride. It simply did not make sense to him that Jesus would have to suffer and die. If Peter could have any say in the matter, he would see to it that it would not happen – and he challenged Jesus to stop it.

Jesus was well aware of the source and reason for Peter’s rebuke. And he turns and says to Peter: “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*” Here Jesus accuses Peter of being the mouthpiece of Satan. Peter had just received his new name and was called the “*rock*” on whose faith in Jesus would build his church. Now, only a few moments later, this same Peter is being rebuked in the strongest of terms as an instrument of Satan. If that could happen to Peter, it can happen to any of us. When we follow our own wisdom instead of that of the Holy Spirit - we can believe we are on the side of God, but are actually taking the side of Satan.

Jesus goes on to say that because Peter was being used by Satan he had become a “hindrance” to Jesus. The original Greek word translated “hinderance” comes from a word that was used for an animal trap, and in particular, the bait and trip of that trap. Satan was using Peter to set a trap for Jesus, to try to lure him away from the cross. This was a real temptation for Jesus because Jesus knew that going to Jerusalem meant personal suffering, as he endured not only the physical pain and death, but also the agony of taking upon the sin of all fallen humanity. If there was another way Jesus would have taken it, for that’s how he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His death. But Jesus put God’s interests first and wanted God’s will to be done. However, that was not yet the case for Peter.

Jesus had just informed the disciples about God’s plan. If Peter’s mind had been attuned to the things of God, he would have understood it and he would have tried to encourage Jesus in it. But that is not where Peter’s mind was at. Peter responded according to his emotions, according to his own desires, according to his own wisdom - and in so doing, became the adversary of God’s plan. We are subject to the same failure when we allow our emotions and desires to control us. Our human wisdom is extremely limited. We must humbly trust in the Lord, not ourselves. We must commit our ways to God, not our own abilities. We must seek God’s kingdom and His righteousness, not our own. We must set our minds on God’s interests, not our own. How can we truly do that? Jesus tells us how in the words that follow.

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Matthew 16:24-27

Jesus tells us that the only way we can commit our hearts and our thinking and our ways and our lives and our families and our church to God is to follow Jesus down the path he walked when he went to the cross for us. Here our Lord and Savior confronts us with the true cost of truly following Jesus.

First, Jesus tells us that we must *deny ourselves*. Jesus isn't speaking here of a minor act of denying ourselves of something that we want - like a bowl of ice-cream after dinner. Nor is he speaking of the more extreme forms of self-denial that we see in many of the religions of the world. Many have denied themselves many things, and thought that they were being deeply spiritual in the process - and yet, they were actually focusing in on themselves the whole time. Jesus isn't merely speaking of “denying” ourselves of “something” *but rather a full denial and renunciation of our very “selves.”* In the original language, the word means to “deny utterly”; to completely “renounce” our focus toward “self” entirely.

Jesus is calling us to do something that is in direct opposition to everything we are told by the culture and by our own fallen inclinations. Everything in us and around us is geared toward gratifying and glorifying the principle of “self”. We're told that we can't really love anyone else until we love ourselves first. We're encouraged to be our own “cause”. Even the concept of “spirituality” in our day has come to refer to the process of fully realizing and actualizing our real “self”. And yet, Jesus calls us to do the very opposite that all of society and all our inner compulsions are telling us to do. Jesus tells us the first step towards following him is to dethrone “self” - lay aside our agenda and the pursuit of our rights and repent of spirit of entitlement that has poisoned the hearts and lives of many who claim to know Jesus.

Second, Jesus tells us that we must *take up our cross*. Sadly, many Christians and many Bible teachers have misunderstood what Jesus means by “taking up our cross.” Many have interpreted this to mean taking up the particular thing in our lives that *burdens* us is the “cross” we must “bear.” For some, “the cross we must bear” may be an illness that plagues us in life. For others it’s a person who bothers us or has offended us. For others, it how we feel about ourselves or another struggle in our lives. The truth is – we would not have any of those kinds of crosses to bear - if we truly did *deny ourselves*. Enough said.

That's not the kind of cross-bearing Jesus is talking about. Rather, Jesus is speaking of something that everyone who lived in his day, and under the rule of the cruel Roman empire, would have probably seen more than once in life - that is, a condemned criminal being forced, as an act of public humiliation, to carry a cross, the instrument of his own death, up the street and to the place of his execution.

To "take up the cross" puts practical action to the idea of "denying the 'self.'" It means to embrace a complete readiness - at all times and in all situations - to consider that we have no more rights than a condemned man would have on his way to execution. It would mean that we deny ourselves even to the point of death - just as Jesus did for us. It would mean that we consider, as Paul has said in Galatians 6:14: "*The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" It would mean that we could give a living testimony of ourselves, as Paul was able to give a living testimony of himself in Galatians 2:20: "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" Matthew 16:25-26

Jesus tells us here that following him should cause us to consider how we value our souls. How we live our lives here on earth depends on how we value of our souls. The life we live in the physical flesh of our bodies is temporary, but the life we live in the spirit of our souls with God is eternal. Life apart from God is ultimately without meaning or purpose. But if we count your own lives here as nothing and instead strive to live for God alone, we will find our lives have both meaning and purpose for both the present and for eternity. David Brainerd, a missionary to the natives in North America in the mid-1700's, told Jonathan Edwards just before he died: "*I do not go to heaven to be advanced, but to give honor to God. It is no matter where I shall be stationed in heaven, whether I have a high or low seat there, but to live and please and glorify God . . . My heaven is to please God and glorify Him, and give all to Him, and to be wholly devoted to His glory.*" David Brainerd set his "*mind on the things of God*" for the glory of God!

Jesus said: "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" Because He loved us, by His mercy and His grace, God sent Jesus Christ into the world to die on a cross, in our place, to pay the penalty for our sins, so we might be forgiven, redeemed and restored back to God. In Christ, the purpose of our lives and the purpose of the church is to glorify God by living out the gospel by pointing people to Jesus - by loving God with all of all our hearts and our souls and our minds and all our strength - and loving all others just as God loves us. God created the church to be His life-transforming presence in the world. The church is not a group of individuals, but a body of Christ-dependent, God-centered, Holy Spirit empowered people gathered around a bloody cross - whose lives are marked with the joy of sacrificial service and whose hearts are focused on the eternal matters of God. Our common ground, our common unity is found at the cross of Jesus Christ. What this means is church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's love. More than we know or will ever realize, church membership is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's joyful mercy to us and to the world.

"For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Matthew 16:27-28

At the cross we see God's will and God's purpose being carried out for us. And as we stand together before that cross Jesus beckons us to know and carry out God's will and God's purpose by denying ourselves, taking up our crosses, and following Him *together* into the glory He created us for - as the Apostle John said, "*After these things I heard, as it were, a loud voice of A GREAT MULTITUDE in heaven, saying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God!'*" (Revelation 19:1). Amen? Amen!

*I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
I have decided to follow Jesus;
No turning back, no turning back.*

*The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
The world behind me, the cross before me;
No turning back, no turning back.*

*Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
Though none go with me, still I will follow;
No turning back, no turning back.*

*Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?
No turning back, no turning back.*

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Pastor Leland Botzet

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