

The Rev. Richard W. Budd, Ph.D., Priest-in-Charge  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Newport News, VA  
3rd Sunday of Easter, April 15, 2018, Year B

*Acts 3 12-19; Psalm 4, 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48*

## ***Whose Church?***

Sometime back in the church I was serving, from down the hallway from my office, I overheard a voice wafting from a nearby meeting say, "This is not Dick Budd's Church! This is our church!" Well, the observation was at least half right—it was not Dick Budd's church. In fact, when I talk with others about whichever parish I am at, I try (although I must admit I sometimes fail) to refrain from calling it "my church." Neither is St. Stephen's Dick Budd's church anymore than it was Scott Baker's church or Marlowe Iverson's church or Ed Gulick's church.

We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Christians gave voice to this Creed long before the Council of Nicea. The Church was born when Jesus called his 12 Apostles from among his followers. And we are the remnant to whom this sacred vessel has been passed. We are the Church, but the defining question is whose church? My church? Your church? No, not even our church? It is, by virtue of his word and hands, His church, guided by the Holy Spirit, moving through time and space by the will of the Father. And we must honor that.

In Matthew (16:18) Jesus speaks for the first time about his Church. As you read it, notice two things about Christ's declaration. First, the strong possessive pronoun "My." Until that time, the Church existed only in eternity. Then notice Jesus uses the future tense, "I will build my Church," makes it clear that it will be built upon his death and resurrection, of which he speaks in subsequent verses.

The Church was destined to become His bride, His body, His fulfillment through which His glory would be manifested to the world.

We, like all who attend here—past, present and future—are merely tenants in God’s house, an institution founded by our Lord Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. And while clergy exercise some different function within that body, we are all truly *temporary residents*. So, it would seem, the second part of the declaration I overheard was also incorrect.

His Church. From eternity Christ loved her, nurtured her. By his death on the cross he redeemed her, and through His Spirit and by His word he sustains her, cleanses her and one day will receive her to Himself in splendor, and as Paul told the Ephesians, “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:26-27).

That is at once both awesome and “scary.” Awesome, because it makes clear just whose Church it is, that it preceded human existence and will endure beyond all humankind. It’s scary because it makes us aware of how we understand the Church and use it for our own ends.

Confusion too often reigns with respect to The Church. It is too frequently conceived of as a human institution to be molded and fashioned to meet our desires and faulty concepts of what is right and wrong. We decorate it with all sorts of human filigree and bombard it with all many of social fads and causes. We tell one another what the Church should and should not be doing, thinking, engaging in and pretend that somehow we have divined the truth through our jaded deliberations.

Perhaps just as frequently, we define the Church as a place, a building. That's "my church," we say. (How does that stack up with Matthew 16:18?) It is very reminiscent of the early Israelites who believed God resided on Mt. Sinai, or marched before them in the Ark of the Covenant. When Moses "ordained" the 70 elders, it was done in a tent, removed from the Israelites' camp—a sacred space where God hung out.

For Jesus, the Church (the Gr. *ekklesia*) means "the assembly," and especially one within the covenant. Paul's references are to local assemblies, regional groupings (The Churches of Thessalonica) or the whole Christian community. The latter, of course, constitutes the Church of which Jesus speaks and will someday gather to Himself.

In the meantime, we muddle and meddle with this precious creation, perhaps presuming that by controlling the political institution, we somehow control God. We meditate, legislate, promulgate without much thought to emulating.

Jesus has chosen to share a precious gift with us—His Church. It is our responsibility to preserve, and uphold the historic faith and order of this larger Church. For it is this Church, Christ has assured us, against which the "gates of hell shall not prevail." It behooves us to be on the inside of that Church rather than on its outskirts.

There is little question that Christendom is currently the target of forces that find the faith a stumbling block to their ends. This, of course, has always been the case, but the signs are quite clear that we need to put on the armor of God and speak out for our faith.

***If we are not careful, we will likely end up exactly where we are headed!***

The secret to why the Church has prevailed over its foes for centuries can be found in her foundation. In short, we—The Church—are the faithful remnant of God’s people who recognize Jesus as the true Messiah and fashion our lives in His image, guided by His teachings—*all* of His teachings—not only the ones that fit our hand in any given situation.

One other observation. As I said earlier, the Church is that community of believers in Christ Jesus—but more importantly, it is an assembly. An assembly implies that we are more than a voluntary association of individuals, but the Body of Christ. We don’t “do church” on our own. Our faith is not a “private thing between me and God” (it may be, but that is not following Christ and being part of His Church). We come together as The Church frequently to be in fellowship, to share the word and in the breaking of the bread. And in the words of our Eucharistic Prayer we come to the Table for strength and renewal and to make us one body and one spirit in Christ.

Remember, the convicting question from the Romans persecuting the early church was not whether you were a follower of Jesus, but “Were you in the assembly?” Being in the assembly meant you were not only a follower of Jesus—but you were active in its growth. “Were you in the assembly?”

Were you? Are you? Will you be?

Permit me now to address the elephant sitting here among us this morning. Allow me to indulge in a postscript which I will call—in all humility—“*The Letter of Richard to St. Stephen’s.*”

Leave-taking and new beginnings are not things any of us relish. They are at best unsettling, and at worst, painful. They are the author of many emotions, and—unfortunately—we experience some or all of them at the same time. But grieving for our past will not lead us into our future.

On this third Sunday of Easter, let us here at St. Stephen's pray for a new beginning, a rebirth of life here. You have a dedicated and active Vestry hard at work to support new directions for St. Stephen's. But they can't do it alone—they need you to help prepare the way. In the spirit of John the Baptist, they need you to make straight the pathways and make smooth the rough roads—

And as your new shepherd, it is my job to ensure we all make that happen. And in that vein, allow me to leave some thoughts with you this morning.

- Resist pyramid building. There are no sides in God's house. No teams, no opponents, no favorites.
- What you want is not always what is—and what is, is not always what **will** be.
- Trust in the Lord.
- Pray. Pray for the impossible, the unreachable—

for with God all things are possible,

and without him there is nothing.

- Meet the unexpected with joy and anticipation.
- Trace daily the footsteps of Jesus to see where they are leading you and **not** leading you.
- Be open to the Holy Spirit to guide you.

- Speak truth to one another in love—  
offer each other the gifts of transparency and patience with one another.
- Don't doubt that God wants to do what is best for you—although you might wonder how painful the best for you will be.
- Accept that God is doing a new thing here—  
Embrace it—don't grieve it.
- God may not always be there at your beckon call—but he will always . . . always be on time.
- Difficulties are not a sign of defeat, but a call onto the next place in which to share love.
- Avoid the temptation to fill the void with recriminations, finger-pointing, gossip and idle chatter about others—past, present or future.

. . . And put to rest the two cardinal sins of Christians:

*Blame and shame.*

And that can only happen through forgiveness—by seeking God's forgiveness for yourself, and by forgiving one another.

--Life is short, and when we reach that time in which we will come face to face with Jesus . . . and we all will—

—I believe that he will ask us only two questions:

“Did you love me?” and

“Did you love one another in my name?”

And that my brothers and sisters is the only true love story.

And it is for those reasons, and more, that Jesus gave us the gift of His Church— and told us

—“Be not afraid, I am with you always”

Please pray with me . . .

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. --*Amen*