

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204

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GATES NOTWITHSTANDING

Gospel of Matthew 16:13-23

Season of Epiphany, January 22, 2017

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As we enter 2017, we begin our 95th anniversary year as a congregation. So, it seems apropos to ask where have we been, where are we and where are we going?

A few years ago, a county newspaper in western Pennsylvania told the story of a farmer named Jonas driving his pick-up truck on a dirt-road when he came alongside a farmer named Cletus on a wagon pulled by a team of mules. The mules were having a difficult time pulling the load. Cletus called from his wagon to Jonas in the pick-up asking, "How much is left of this hill?" Jonas smiled and said, "Cletus, there is no hill; your back wheels have come off."

Today, I bring you glad tidings of great joy; St. John's, our wheels are all in place. From time to time, we do climb some hills together; but we have good traction.

On July 24, 1994, Dr. Claude Broach preached in this St. John's Pulpit. He was Pastor Emeritus at the time. In his sermon, *'The Street and the Sanctuary.'* Dr. Broach said, "Throughout the centuries, the Church has argued with itself about the world; what to do about it? It is now, and always has been, a world struggling with problems, full of injustice and cruelty, full of suffering, yet full of joy and delight. So, what should we do about it as Christians? Do we try to clean it up, solve its problems, and heal its wounds? Or do we close our eyes to those who suffer, ignore the evil, and go our merry way in search of what we have learned to call 'the good life?'" Later in his sermon, Dr. Broach offers this answer: "It gives me a great sense of joy to feel that this church has always sought to live on the high ground of great religion, refusing to be party to the trivial and divisive quarrels or the glamorous fads of cheap religion and cheap grace."

For 95 years, through wars; financial depressions and expansions; exponential growth of our city; racial segregation and integration; local community transitions; efforts for women's rights; shifts of political power; denominational crises, departures and deaths of members and the entrance of many new members, St. John's has lived "on the high ground of great religion, refusing to be party to the trivial and divisive quarrels or the glamorous fads of cheap religion and cheap grace." How is this possible?

On two occasions, I have stood at Caesarea Philippi, 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The water trickling forth from under Mount Hermon becomes a chief source of the Jordan River. An ancient place of worship with numerous shrines and temples dedicated to various gods, it was atop this giant rock that Jesus asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that I am?*” **JESUS’ QUESTION STILL MATTERS!** They reported, “*Some say you are John the Baptizer; others compare you to Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.*” Jesus asked his followers, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Simon Peter spoke, “*You are the Messiah*” meaning ‘savior’ or ‘deliverer.’ “*You are the Son of the Living God.*” Jesus responded by blessing Simon Peter declaring, “***On this rock I will build my church and the gates of evil will not prevail against it.***” The movement of Jesus’ ministry – which we continue today as part of Christ’s Church – is not founded upon a rock in northern Israel nor on one follower named Simon Peter. The Jesus movement is founded upon the confession that Jesus is Lord. The Jesus movement is always moving into the world under the authority of Jesus as Lord with evil’s gates notwithstanding. Let us be clear in interpreting Jesus’ declaration: **The Jesus movement is on the offensive and the forces of evil - racism, prejudice, hostility, cruelty, destruction, falsehoods, injustice, violence and greed are on the defensive.**

Friends, St. John’s has lived on ‘*the high ground of religion*’ for 95 years because we have stood on the solid rock of confessing Jesus as our Lord. The power of our confession may seem like a few drops of water; but it becomes a life-changing tributary. No other commitment, idea, creed or energy is at the core of our living. We are unmasking the Living God and translating the Gospel of God; as followers of Jesus, we are seeking to reveal Jesus, our Lord, as the Living Word of God who has fleshed out the love of God, the will of God and the mission of God.

Viewed from above, the Church is Holy; created by The Living God bearing divine character as revealed in Jesus. But, when viewed from below, the Church is imperfect; adjusting to changing contexts while seeking to express the Gospel in the world. ‘*How can God’s mission address today’s needs?*’ ‘*How do we steward our resources to serve the needs of our members and those beyond ourselves?*’ ‘*How do we discern, collaborate, plan and act so as to be actively faithful to God in the 21st century?*’ As part of God’s holy and imperfect Church, we follow Jesus bridging polarities, incarnating love and creating multiple pathways for Christian service. We serve God by the serving the world in ways that reflect the life and teachings of Jesus.

Today, I want to send you forth with some sightlines for where St. John's is going. These efforts are set forth in the goals of our 2020 Vision determined by you as church members. I offer these sightlines to you through the six core commitment areas of our St. John's Covenant.

First, **WORSHIP**: For 95 years, St. John's has invested in meaningful worship of God. We do not use Sunday morning to entertain an audience. We use Sunday morning to gather as a congregation to focus on the Living God through submission, praise, confession, learning, giving and making commitments. Kevin Gray is serving us extremely well and expanding the repertoire of musical offerings presented to God. We plan to develop new devotional and worship resources as we continue to assure our worship of God is participatory, intergenerational and formational.

Second, **LEARNING**: Several members and groups in the church work with Allison Benfield, Lee Gray and Martha Kearsse to provide learning experiences that connect faith with life and equip people for ministry in the world with expanded understanding and increased impact. We will continue to offer new opportunities for study, continuing to enrich the strength of our Sunday School Ministry. Please make space in your life for creative learning experiences.

Third, **COMMUNITY OF FAITH**: We use the African Violet principle in St. John's. When you are growing African Violets, you must have more than one and they must be in touch with one another or they wilt. In St. John's, we love one another. We are in touch with one another. If you are in a Sunday School Ministry group, you experience this African Violet principle. If you are not in a Sunday School Ministry group, please let me encourage you to say 'yes' when a group approaches you about becoming involved. Our Pastoral Deacons are also wonderful caregivers. People are craving community today! Compassion and kindness matter!

Fourth, **STEWARDSHIP**: This past week, the Finance Resource Team reviewed the 2016 financial report. Once again, your financial faithfulness has allowed the church to reach all of our ministry expenses and mission commitments with enough left over to provide a year-end bonus to the church staff. In addition, financial commitments to the 2017 financial ministry plan surpass those of last year. We have strengthened our long-term endowment funds and identified priority projects that can help the church move forward such as installation of Wi-Fi throughout our campus, enhanced security for our preschool division and improved outreach and hospitality

through signage, a welcome center and printed resources. We also continue to make long-neglected maintenance improvements to our facilities thus enhancing our ongoing ministries.

Fifth, **JOYFUL WITNESS**: I affirm you again for being a friendly church. Recently, several of our guests have remarked that you make them feel fully welcomed. They also note this is unusual in their experience. While this is sad; we are honestly friendly. This is not pretense. This is an expression of our identity. This morning, we will welcome some new members. One of these persons recently told me, “*We did not know a church like this existed. We are so glad we found St. John’s.*” Friends, there are people all around Charlotte who are looking for a church like St. John’s. Research shows that 82% of ‘unchurched’ people around Charlotte would visit St. John’s if a trusted friend invited them. Yet, only 2% of church members have invited someone to attend with them in the past year. We need to identify the ‘unchurched’ people in our pathways of life and find ways to introduce ourselves to more ‘unchurched’ persons. Then we need to let them know about us in creative and honest ways. People want to follow the loving Jesus.

Sixth, and last, **SERVANT CHURCH**: On New Year’s Day, I introduced MT25 to you. MT25 is based on the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 “*Just as you did it unto one of the least of these, you did it to me.*” Our Mission Resource Team is guiding us to connect every member of St. John’s with pathways of service to reflect Matthew 25. We see Jesus as we invest our gifts by building righteousness and peace through community development, education, local and global efforts to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, encourage the prisoner and welcome the stranger.

Charles Wellborn tells of a Sunday when he was a guest preacher in a church with a high-beamed ceiling and stained glass windows. As the service began, a bird swooped down over the heads of the choir. Several times the bird tried to find a way out through the bright window light. The congregation sang hymns, read scriptures and offered prayers – all with some pious peeking. The pastor introduced Charles to preach, and he did; but the people were paying attention to the bird. After the service, Charles asked the pastor why he didn’t just stop the service and release the bird. The pastor said, “I know we were just going through the motions, but I didn’t want to interrupt what was going on.”

Friends, let us agree that we will never just go through the motions of being Christ’s Church. We are part of the Jesus movement built upon our commitment to continue the work of Jesus in this world. We are moving forward, living on the high ground of great religion, confessing Jesus our Lord, the gates of evil notwithstanding. Amen and AMEN.