

**CATCH: Three
Important Questions**

Matthew 16:13-20

*Why do people need Jesus?
Why do people need the Church?
Why do people need this church?*

A sermon preached by
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When we were in Bethlehem on our recent trip to the Holy Land, we made a stop at the superstore of Holy Land Souvenirs. It's called Nissan Brothers (no relation to the car company), and there is every imaginable carved piece of olive wood, mother-of-pearl, jewelry, and other assorted trinkets available for purchase. Our host took us on a very interesting trip through the workshop below the sales floor where they were carving pieces of olive wood, then our group was given some background and orientation to the store. Then our host said, "Look around, and if you have any questions, let us know." Then, as if on cue (because it was on cue), multiple sales people emerged from back rooms and closets to blanket the floor with "helpful" people. They were very good, very aggressive, and I'm sure Nissan brothers made a killing off our group. But they were very nice souvenirs.

I'm just not a person who responds very well to pushy sales people. If I'm not given space to look and think, I will usually shut down and walk away rather than be pressured into buying. On the other hand, when I want to buy something, I want somebody to answer questions and show me my options. Too many times I haven't been able to find help, or I run into a sales person leaned up against the merchandise looking at his or her phone or shooting the breeze with another employee. That sends me out of the store as well.

What does it take to be an effective sales person? Jesus called his first disciples to learn how to fish for people. We talked about that last week. That means we are supposed to reach out and share the good news of Jesus with other people. We are the sales force for Christ. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus, to transform lives and communities with the love of God. We don't want to be pushy and obnoxious, but we also don't want to be inattentive, apathetic, and ineffective.

One of the ways to be effective in our presentation of the Gospel is to know the answers to three important questions. These questions come from Pastor Adam Hamilton, who is now the senior pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the world. But he didn't start that way. In 1990, he was appointed to start a church in Leawood, Kansas, in the Kansas City area. They started the church in a funeral home, so they adopted the name

Church of the Resurrection. Now the church averages about 15,000 attenders every weekend on four campuses in the Kansas City area. About a dozen years in, Hamilton published a book about his journey with Resurrection called *Leading Beyond The Walls*. In that book he said he had to get answers for three questions before he could start his church.

The first question was, “Why do people need Jesus?” It can no longer be a cultural assumption that people know they need to be Christians. There is much more diversity in our culture today. There are so many more options, including the option not to believe at all. So if we are going to sell the Gospel, why do people need to hear and respond to it?

For most people, there is enough trouble and dissatisfaction that they realize they could have a better life. There could be more happiness and fulfillment, more purpose and reason, more hope in their lives. Our belief is that the deepest needs of life are spiritual, and Jesus is the source of our spiritual fulfillment.

The key to making this claim is our own personal experience. Have you known the touch of Jesus in your life? Do you have a story about your own encounter with Jesus Christ? In the 9th chapter of John, Jesus heals a man born blind. When the authorities question him, they accuse Jesus of being a sinner. The healed man replies, “*I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.*”¹ Is that your testimony? I was blind, but now I see. I was lost, but now I am found. I was sinking deep in sin; now I am lifted up on eagles’ wings. You can tell people why they need Jesus if you have answered the question for yourself.

About the midpoint in his ministry, Jesus took the disciples on a field trip north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, a Roman town built around an ancient cultic site used by the Greeks as a temple to the Greek god Pan. There is a cave there they called “the Gates of Hell.” People had worshipped innumerable gods in this place. In the midst of these multiple expressions of religion, Jesus asked a question: “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples replied, “Some say, John, Elijah, or one of the prophets.” And Jesus said, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter replied, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!*”² It doesn’t really matter what everyone else says about Jesus; what ultimately matters is what you believe

about him. That's the only thing you can share when you tell somebody why they need to know him.

Robert Webber was a professor of worship studies who told about traveling on a plane from San Francisco to Los Angeles a few years ago. He was sitting next to the window, reading a Christian book. The man next to him was Asian and spoke in an accent from the Eastern hemisphere. He asked Webber, "Are you a religious man?" Webber answered that he was. The man said, "I am, too." They began talking about their religions.

In the middle of the conversation Webber asked, "Can you give me a one-liner that captures the essence of your faith?"

"Well, yes," he said. "We are all part of the problem, and we are all part of the solution."

They talked about his one-liner, which Webber felt was very insightful. After a while he said, "Would you like a one-liner that captures the Christian faith?"

"Sure," the man responded.

Webber said, "We are all part of the problem, but there is only one man who is the solution. His name is Jesus."³ That's why people need him.

The second question is "Why do people need the church?" When Peter made his confession of faith, Jesus responded, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*"⁴ Interesting that he said that right under the mouth of that cave! This is the first use of the word "church" in the Scripture. I'm sure Peter thought, Great! What's a church? It's a Greek word *ekklesia* that means "called out." We are called out to be together in a community of faith known as the church. Christianity happens in the context of community.

The necessity of church is kind of a hard sell nowadays. We live in a culture, particularly in America, of radical individualism. We think we can make it on our own without anybody's help. Almost a third of Americans are unaffiliated with a church, about 40% of people under 40, yet many of those people consider themselves "spiritual, but not religious," believers in

God but not in church. Why do we need an institution that carries so much baggage in our culture today?

The simple fact is, we can't do discipleship alone. We need the teaching; we need the accountability; we need the support when we are having a tough time; we need the opportunity to join with others to be in mission to the needy. Christianity is not an individual sport.

John Wesley, our Methodist founder, wrote much about the nature of the Christian life. He said, "Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy Solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."⁵ Wesley knew there is a deep need for Christians to be in community. We need the church.

Adam Hamilton, in *Leading Beyond the Walls*, gives six reasons we need the church:

1. The Church is the continuing Incarnation of Jesus in the world.
2. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit.
3. The Bible commands us to meet together to encourage one another. That's from Hebrews: "*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*"⁶
4. Christians can accomplish far more together than they can apart.
5. Each believer is gifted by the Holy Spirit for work in the Church.
6. The Church is essential for becoming a deeply committed Christian.⁷

That's why people need the church. But why do people need *this* church? If you are going to invite someone to church, why not invite them to enjoy the fellowship at First Baptist or Immaculate Conception or First Presbyterian? Those are all fine churches. Why ask people to come here?

Yesterday we had an Administrative Board retreat, and I asked our church leaders this question. Why do people need this particular church? And they had some good answers. They pointed to the community of prayer and the emotional support that they find here. The excellence of the worship, the opportunities for service and mission to the community, the preschools for our kids, the history and the downtown presence of the

church—all good reasons. Someone finally said people need this church because God is at work in and through our congregation to make a difference in the world. That's true, very true, but it's also true of other churches.

I think the reason people need First United Methodist Church is because *we* are here—you and me. We're here! It's not that other churches are not doing wonderful things; they are. But this is where we have found a home and a family and the call of Christ to be in community, and we would love it if others found this church as meaningful as we do. One Methodist thinker, D T. Niles, said evangelism is “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”⁸ We have found bread here. In fact, it is the best thing since sliced bread. That is the good news we want to share.

So what is it exactly that we're trying to sell?

The Big Kahuna is a strange little movie (don't rent this for family night) about three salesmen who attend a sales conference in Wichita, Kansas. They are in the business of industrial lubricants, and the purpose of their attendance at the conference is to land a contract with the president of a big industrial firm (The Big Kahuna). The two seasoned salesmen, Phil and Larry, are joined by Bob, a young man on his first sales trip. Bob is also a born-again Christian. At the conference, Bob actually meets the Big Kahuna, but he spends his conversation talking not about industrial lubricants, but about Jesus. He makes friends with the Big Kahuna and shares his faith with him. This does not set well with his fellow salesmen.

Larry accuses Bob of being insincere. Bob says, “If we're nothing but functions here, then why don't they just send robots?”

“They don't send robots, Bob, for the simple reason that they haven't invented one yet. The day comes when they can build a robot to do what we do and make it work, then that's exactly what they'll do, precisely. But until that day, they send us. They say, ‘Hey Bob, Larry, Phil, why don't you go on down to Wichita for a couple of days. Don't worry about your room and board. We'll take care of that.’ And for a couple of days, Bob, we lose our identities here in Wichita. And we become the hands of the company, shaking all the other hands before us. What you did, the reason you were insincere is that you cut off that bond. It would be like the hand just sort of

breaking away from the arm and saying, ‘Oh, you know what? I have this other thing out here to do that has nothing to do with you.’”

Bob begins, “The apostle Paul says. . .”

“Please don't do that,” interjects Larry. “Please don't do that. I'm trying to have a conversation here with you. Don't bring the apostle Paul in. I'm trying to do something else.”

Bob, frustrated, says, “I don't see how we can have a conversation like this if I'm not allowed to bring up the subject of God.”

Larry says, “We're not talking about God. I'm talking about something bigger than God.”

“Bigger than God?” Bob says with incredulity.

Larry continues, “At issue is not your belief in God or your desire to spread that belief. At issue is what we're here to do.”

“Which is what, Larry?”

“We're here to sell lubricants, Bob. Industrial lubricants. We're not here to save souls.”⁹

Let me be clear about what we're here to do. This is why we were put on the planet. It is not to sell industrial lubricants. It *is* to save souls. We are here under the call of Christ to fish for people, to make disciples in his name, to transform lives and communities with the love of God we see most clearly in God's Son Jesus.

Learn the answers to these questions: Why do people need Jesus? Why do people need the church? Why do people need this church? And you will be ready for the most important conversations of your life.

(Prayer)

¹ John 9:25.

² Matthew 16:16.

³ Robert Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 26.

⁴ Matthew 16:17f.

⁵ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/no-holiness-but-social-holiness>.

⁶ Hebrews 10:24-25.

⁷ Adam Hamilton, *Leading Beyond The Walls* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 23ff.

⁸ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6477664.D_T_Niles.

⁹ *The Big Kahuna* (Lions Gate Films, 1999); written by Roger Rueff, directed by John Swanbeck.