

Today we continue reading through the gospel of Matthew by following the lectionary, the passages of Scripture assigned to each Sunday of the church year. Today we pick up a reading from the 16th chapter of the gospel of Matthew.

We have heard a lot lately in our culture about monuments. In this story that we will be reading, Jesus comes into a town that has been re-named and where monuments have been built to make a political statement.

We will read that Jesus comes into Caesarea Philippi. This town was renamed Caesarea after the Romans took over the town. Herod the Great named the town in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. Herod the Great had a big statue built in the center of town and a large temple built to honor Caesar.

These structures were built honoring a historical character to communicate to the people where they were to place their allegiance. Their allegiance was to be directed toward Rome and the Roman authorities. Caesar was to be their lord. When I went to Israel several years ago I was able to visit this site and see the Temple for myself.

It is into this seat of Roman power that Jesus chooses to enter with his disciples. As he enters into the town Jesus asks the disciples a very important question. Peter will give him an answer.

Read Matthew 16:13-20

Mavis Wanczyk this week won the Powerball jackpot worth some \$758 million. She immediately contacted her boss and quit her job. She accomplished what I hear many of us wish would happen to us. She won the lottery. My chances of winning would increase significantly if I ever bought a ticket but since I never have I guess I have 0 chance of winning the lottery.

Many of us would argue that winning the lottery is the best thing that could happen to any of us. We have dreams of paying off debts and taking fancy vacations and quitting our jobs. Winner the lottery is the best thing that could happen to any of us. Or is it? I read this week about some other big lottery winners and what happened to them.

According to an article in USA Today last week, this is the fate of some previous lottery winners.

1. Jack Whittaker. He was already a millionaire when he won the \$315 million lottery in West Virginia in 2002, according to Time. The then-55-year-old construction company president claimed he went broke four years later. His granddaughter and daughter died soon after from drug overdoses and he was robbed of \$545,000 sitting in his car while he was at a strip club.

2. Abraham Shakespeare. He won \$30 million in a 2009 Florida lottery and was murdered soon after. The 47-year-old was shot twice in the chest and then buried under a slab of concrete in a backyard, according to ABC News. DeeDee Moore, who befriended him after his lottery win, was found guilty of first-degree murder in 2012.

3. Ronnie Music Jr. This Georgia man was sentenced to serve 21 years in prison in April 2017 after he invested part of his \$3 million lottery winnings in a crystal meth ring, according to CBS News.

4. Urooj Khan. This Illinois man died in 2012, just one day after collecting the lump sum on a \$1 million win. It was originally found by a medical examiner that Khan died of natural causes, but another official found later that the winner was fatally poisoned with cyanide, according to CBS News.

5. Jeffrey Dampier. He won \$20 million in the Illinois lottery in 1996 and used the winnings to help his family. But his sister-in-law Victoria, along with her boyfriend, kidnapped Dampier and shot him in the head. The two are serving life sentences for the murder.

6. William Post. Post won \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania lottery in 1988. Soon after, his landlady sued him, claiming he had agreed to give her part of the winnings, according to the Washington Post. She was awarded \$5.2 million in 1992. Post had six failed marriages and was eventually convicted and sentenced to prison for firing a gun at a debt collector. He died of respiratory failure in 2006.

Citing these examples one could then argue that basing one's priorities on acquiring a lot of money may not be the best place to put our trust. Ultimately the question that Peter is asked in our reading today is a question about where we place our trust. Jesus asks Peter, "Who Do You Say that I Am?" and Peter responds by saying, "You are the Christ or Messiah. You are the Son of the Living God."

In response Jesus calls him blessed. Jesus then says it is based on this testimony of allegiance to Jesus as Christ that the church will be built.

This is the text of Scripture that Roman Catholics point to as Peter being the person that the church is built upon. As a result all Catholic priests are blessed with a laying on of hands that ties each priest back to the person of Peter.

But another way of looking at this text is that the church is built upon the testimony of Peter. It is not about who he is but about what he believes. Therefore when any of us profess faith in Jesus as Messiah and Christ and put our allegiance upon him then this is what the church is built upon.

Today we have welcomed 4 new confirmands into the church. These are 4 young people who worked hard to learn about their faith so that they could profess it today in front of all of you. Each of these 4 confirmands had a covenant partner to encourage and guide them as well as their parents. Today everyone here made that same commitment.

By professing their faith today they profess the same faith that Peter professed 2000 years ago in front of Jesus. Their profession is not only about taking part in a ritual but about making a commitment to following the one who teaches us the way that God yearns for us to live.

We have also presented lots of Bibles today to several young people. Receiving a Bible from this church is not just a ritualistic act. It is something much deeper than ritual. Presenting Bibles is the commitment by this church to help each of these young people to learn these stories so that they know the importance of placing their alliance upon Jesus as Christ and Messiah.

One of you may become a lottery winner. If you do remember to contribute 10% to the church. But if you come into a lot of money or if you never come into any significant amount of money I invite you to remember the words of Peter.

Ultimately our allegiance is not to financial success. Ultimately we are invited to place our alliance upon Jesus. To profess faith in him and to be a part of Christ's church.

When asked to state who is Jesus? We are all invited to profess a faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the Living God.

As we make that profession then Christ builds the church upon each of us. AMEN.

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-Given: August 27, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)