

**VIEW FROM THE PORCH: THE QUESTION ONLY YOU CAN ANSWER;
MATT 16:13-20; 8.27.17; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH**

It's that time of year – summer begins its swan song, fall is near – a seasonal transition that asks for pause and perspective before we wrap ourselves in the busyness of another church and school year and layers of clothing for colder days.

My mentor David McFarlane and I came up with “View from the Porch” years ago on the porch of the McFarlane cottage in New Hampshire. Our families were vacationing together and David and I were going back to our congregations on Labor Day weekend needing sermons to preach.

David said “let's preach about what we've been reading and talking about on the porch.” At first, it seemed to me like ‘cheating’-preaching a sermon on what we thought and discussed while sitting in rocking chairs staring at Lake Winnepesaukee. It didn't have the necessary rigor. I was sure Calvin would object from his grave. But then it made perfect sense. Our conversations were serious and playful, encompassing church and nation; we shared pastoral concerns for church members and were honest to the point of pushing to our deepest hunches and intuitions regardless of reverence or tradition.

Our source material included biographies, spy novels, Steven King thrillers, the *New York Times* we picked at the nearby general store, and neighbors who passed by our screened-in sanctum where we held court and solved the world's problems. This is, of course, what porches were designed for and social media has displaced. Most neighborhoods, most families don't connect this way anymore; and civility suffers.

“The porch” in 2017 includes our own porch at 33 Colonial Circle – a secluded perch between the back of the house and garage with a kind of secret garden and brick walk between. Plus the porch at the home of dear friends' at Chautauqua in a community a mile north of the Institute where they have vacationed all their lives and are now retired from Pittsburgh.

And, there's the porch in New Hampshire where Carol and I will be this time next week with family and neighbors.

In fact, I just finished painting our porch at home. It was recently repaired from deteriorated wood and now has that fresh paint look; four colors – Paris white walls and floor with Carriage Door Red, Olympic Green and Ashlar Gray trim. Don't you love the names of paints; our entire third floor is done in Vanilla Ice Cream. I'm the one who purchased the paint, once I read that name we had paint for the third floor.

It is so pleasant being on that newly painted porch that I found my old sketch book and started drawing still lifes of the porch pillars, windows and wicker furniture. There is something deeply calming and satisfying about drawing.

The books I've hauled to the porch reveal the ebb and flow of my wandering mind but are ordered by some overarching themes – books by and about Henry David Thoreau in this 200th anniversary of his birth; poetry and essays about writing poetry, biography, two books of philosophy, Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* and *Moby Dick*, again.

I don't claim to have read all of these books. My m. o. is to say morning prayers in my study or on the porch after feeding the dog and making coffee then read from eight to ten books between 5 and 6:30 am, then attempt to write some poetry.

What the reading does, similar to but not exactly the same as sketching and saying prayers, is to calm my mind but also tap into whatever insights or examples I can find of wisdom, gratitude or authenticity.

What writing allows or better 'requires' me to do is to peel back the layers of life like the layers of an onion. The subject matter for poems finds me, I don't find it; certain people, moments, 'spots of time' as Wordsworth called them hook me with their poignancy: my daughter-in-law's grace in the midst of her breast cancer treatments; the faded cover of a first edition of *Charlotte's Web*; the memory of receiving an F on my first paper in a philosophy course; the rising sun I saw on the porch of our son's home in Ridgefield, CT in May after a night of rain.

Shift with me from the porch for a moment to Matthew. Jesus and his disciples are on a figurative porch when they gather in Caesarea Philippi. This respite from the crowds comes at mid-point in Jesus' ministry and mid-point of Matthew's gospel.

Jesus wants to reflect on where they have been and where they are going. He has caused quite a stir. Lots of people are aware of him but not sure exactly who he is as the many rumors about his identity that Peter names indicate. Thus, his question to his disciples – 'Who do you say that I am?' – to make sure they still know and accept who he is and what his mission is about.

It is clear the story is of significance because all four gospels include it. If we look at the episode from Matthew's point of view we see interesting differences from the other versions. This is one of only two times the word "church" or 'ecclesia' in the Greek, which means "called out," is used in the gospels. We also notice that Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God is linked to the existence, identity and reality of what it means to be the church. Peter's recognition of Jesus as Messiah is precisely what Jesus is the foundation on which Jesus will build the church. We'll come back to that.

Location is also important: Caesarea Philippi is in the far north of Israel at the base of Mt. Hermon and was known as a sacred site for the Greek god Pan.

It was named Caesarea Philippi by Philip II to honor the Roman Emperor Augustus; Philip made restorations to the city and minted a coin with the image of Augustus that was, of course, considered idolatrous by the Jews.

To set Peter's confession and the birth announcement of the church here is like going to a gun-infested, gang-riddled neighborhood or the heart of Las Vegas or maybe into the midst of what would be a rapidly growing city – like right here where Westminster was founded. The church tends to plunk itself down in the midst of human need, social injustice, at locations where the idols of culture are worshipped. Maybe you saw the op-ed piece by a church member in Hong Kong risking arrest, protesting the oppression of Christians in China.

Let me make three quick points about the today's lesson then come back to the porch. When Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus' response is, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven."

Peter doesn't come to his understanding of Jesus on his own; because he is smarter or more perceptive or even has inside information others lack. In fact, Jesus is counter to all the expectations of who the Messiah would be and what he would look like. Rather, Peter's awareness of Jesus' identity comes to him as revelation from a truth and power greater than him.

People who have visions talk about them as if they are given for a purpose, not to claim as their own but to share for the larger good. Lincoln's resolve to unite the nation during the Civil War was a truth and goal bigger than Lincoln; JFK's vision to send a person to the moon was a vision to inspire a nation that was lagging behind the Soviet Union in science and technology. Many said it was impossible. But millions more resonated with the truth and power of that goal that was bigger than JFK. When Peter said Jesus is the Messiah, "He's the one" he was speaking not because he had some litmus test or proof but because when he was in Jesus' presence he sensed a truth and power for good that was bigger than him. Revelation is a gift.

Secondly, when Jesus called Peter the rock on which he would build his church and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it, Jesus was announcing that the church would be an invasive force against darkness and evil in the world.

The church, in other words, is not a place merely to hang out, or to pursue my self-help agenda or to retreat from the world – it is all those things but it is primarily a community engaged in mortal conflict; Jesus himself will risk and give his life to this end; to ignore or discount or replace this mission is to make of the church a social club or lecture group.

Because the founder of the church was executed by two empires – state and religion – which conspired against him to protect their self-interests and perpetuate their power and thus deprive the poor, the sick, and the hungry (familiar themes these days!); to confess this founder as the head of the church threatens those who choose to follow a more palatable creed and capitulate to the seductions of death. That 26 year old Chinese activist who is protesting the violation of basic freedoms in Hong Kong said what happens to him is inconsequential. It is hard for people like us in North America – who enjoy democratic freedoms and affluence – to imagine such sacrifice. Yet, it the times in which we live may require such courage and principle.

Thirdly, Jesus said to Peter, "I give you the keys to the Kingdom; whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven; whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven."

The keys to the reign or kingdom of God signal the ultimate victory of the church. The power to bind and loose is the same function of having keys.

The other word for keys is authority, moral and spiritual authority.

Moral and spiritual authority – virtually untapped in the mainline church in a generation – makes the church a formidable enemy of injustice and enables the final triumph of the kingdom of God over forces of death.

It is why the collapse of that moral and spiritual authority in Germany in the 1930s was so tragic; what if the church had been the voice of moral authority that was needed as Hitler was rising to power; or as the Vatican was capitulating to German pressure to turn its eyes away from war machine then crushing Germany's peaceful neighbors and then systemically murdering Jews and others considered misfits or trouble makers.

What if the church had expressed outrage when the MS St. Louis a German ocean liner with over 900 Jews was turned away from the United States in 1939 and forced to return to Europe where many of those 900 Jews aboard the ship ended up in death camps.

I don't recall porch conversations like the ones this summer raising such existential questions of faith and witness, ever – not about the 1930s but about the present day. What is happening in our nation is deeply troubling and without precedent. The polarization that shows no signs of lessening reveals, week by week, new fractures across the communities of America. We pine for the old lazy days of summer.

On the one hand, we need healing, and fast, but on the other hand, how can healing occur across a divide that is in basic disagreement about the violation of human rights and the role of the United States with regard to immigration, nuclear disarmament, preservation of wildlife and the environment, innovation in the production of energy and a host of other issues vital to our identity as Americans and survival as a species.

Not to mention bipartisanship which used to enable our legislative process to solve complex problems and strengthen our nation and way of life.

Today's lesson that the church is the community that confesses Jesus as Messiah means that when we are at our best we stand by and seek to emulate a historical figure who did not compromise his commitment to the source of life and the well being of all people.

It sounds simple but if a white supremacist is shouting hateful slogans or if we see laws passed or executive orders signed that diminish or negate our ideals as a nation or threaten the environment or line the pockets of the super wealthy at the expense of the poor then it's not so simple.

We are being called in 2017 to exercise the church's moral and spiritual authority; weapons that bind hate and liberate those trapped in despair; weapons greater than the ignorance and fear of darkness.

The porch is a place to contemplate such matters and ask ourselves what we would do if Nazi's came to town to demonstrate or if a wall is built on our southern border or if our Jewish or Muslim friends or their properties are attacked.

I don't remember ever thinking such things could happen here.

The porch this summer has caused me to think differently. Amen.