

The Church Is a Gathering of Disciples Making Disciples

Kenwood Baptist Church

January Sermon Series: Why Church?

Pastor David Palmer with Elder Steve Marosi

January 6, 2019

TEXT: Matthew 16:13-19 and 18:12-28



PASTOR DAVID:

Good morning, Kenwood. This morning we start a new series and a new year. This January, we will turn our attention to a new sermon series called *Why Church?* Many people today say that they are interested in spiritual life but not in any organized religion. Others believe that they can know God, but they desire to do that apart from the church. Still others have been hurt by a negative experience in church and no longer want to be associated with it. Seven and a half million fewer Americans identify themselves as religious than three years ago.

Yet, in the New Testament, the gathered church is the most recognizable evidence in the world of what God has done in Christ. The church comes into being by the eternal plan and purpose of God. The Scriptures invite us to see the church as a holy assembly of disciples making disciples. The church multiplies throughout the world through global mission and individual mentoring. The church is, in fact, the primary place where God's wisdom and glory are on display in a vibrant growing family. This group, and others like it, are the best evidence in the world that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. The church is living. It's moving. It's a fully functioning body of Christ in the world where every person has a vital role. The church is the place where heaven and earth are joined together in prayer, suffering, witness, transformation, and glory.

How do we bridge these two perspectives? Sometimes nursery rhymes can help. Nursery rhymes can, in fact, be quite profound, so let's practice together. Put your hands out like this. It

is critical that your palms are up. Now, intertwine your fingers with the back of your hands together. Bring your thumbs together and point your index fingers up. “Here is the church, there is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people.” Praise God!

Well, nursery rhymes are profound, for sure, but more than nursery rhymes, we need God’s Word. In this series, we are going to look at the church in the Gospels, the church in Acts, the church in the letters, and the church in Revelation. Each week we will focus on a key passage on the church, and this January series is going to be shared with our team of elders at Kenwood. We had a phenomenal retreat all day yesterday. What a godly group of lovers of Christ, who love this church who met together! The elders are going to share the preaching series, and each week each message will be done by an elder team. This morning, as we begin this series, *Why Church?*, we are going to look at the gospels, and Steve Marosi, one of our elders, will preach with me.

In order to answer: “Why church?” or “Does the church really matter?” we need to first understand what the church even is. You can read through the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and you might miss the word *church*. One of the surprising facts about the gospels is that the word “church” occurs only three times in just two passages, Matthew 16 and Matthew 18. These two passages are profoundly instructive for us. They teach us that the church is, in fact, a community, a group of people, a family who share four remarkable features. As we get started, Steve is going to preach through the first passage, Matthew 16:13-20. Let’s listen to God’s Word.

STEVE:

Jesus asked a lot of questions – over three hundred of them in the four gospels, and in our reading from Matthew 16, we find Jesus asking life’s most important question. Everything depends on how you answer it.

In Matthew 16:13, Jesus takes an approach that in my company we call *primary research*. He is asking people about their attitudes and opinions. He asks his disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” Notice that no sooner does he begin to hear the answers than he switches to the most important question. This is the one to pay special attention to. He asks them, “Who do **you** say that I am?” And that question echoes throughout time to this very day, in this very place. If Jesus asked every one of us, “*Who do you say that I am?*” what would be your response? This is the ultimate question, the heart of the matter. It’s irrelevant what others think. But what *you* think about Jesus matters enormously.

Peter, typically the boldest one, replies fully, directly, and without hesitation: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Think about it. Here’s Peter, this disciple, who is a Jew, has

just declared that the man standing before him is the long-awaited Messiah, that he is the Son of the living God. He is essentially saying he is God himself. It is a remarkable and outrageous statement. How does Jesus respond? Jesus immediately affirms Peter's answer, blessing him for it. With those words of Peter, this confession is the foundation of our faith, and with those words, the church comes into existence. Despite a wide variety of traditions and denominations, we know the true church gathers around this confession of who Jesus Christ is.

God the Father revealed this truth to Peter. Not that it wasn't based on evidence. If you will take time to read the first fifteen chapters of Matthew, you will see what Peter saw with his own eyes: he saw Jesus walk on water; he saw Jesus feed five thousand with just a few loaves and fishes; he saw Jesus heal the blind, the diseased, the paralyzed; and he even saw Jesus raise a girl from the dead. Even so, despite all that evidence, we are all too easily blinded to the truth. It is the grace of God that reveals it to us. You can't drum up belief, it is a work of the Father.

So, what is the church? It is a community of people who share the answer to the ultimate question. Jesus goes further, seizing on Peter's confession to proclaim that he (Jesus) will build his church on this "rock" of truth. In other words, Jesus is building the church on himself. There are a lot of different interpretations of this passage, but we will take Peter's interpretation from a later time when he wrote 1 Peter 2. He said: "Jesus Christ is a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious: . . . The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (1 Pet. 2:4,7). Thus, Jesus is the cornerstone – the rock on which the church is built.

The church is vital to God's plan, if it is not already obvious by now from this passage. It's not optional. Jesus says the "gates of hell shall not prevail against the church." Gates don't attack, but gates are attacked. Think about it. He is saying that the church is so powerful that it is unconquerable. There is supreme strength in this shared community built on Jesus Christ. We are called to prevail against evil, hypocrisy, discouragement, emptiness, fear, despair, and isolation.

We live in an individualistic society; we don't often think of "we." Yet the Bible consistently teaches a collective identity in the Lord. If you go out of this place without connecting meaningfully with another person, without participating in the community, you'll miss out on a lot. Not only will you miss out, but others will miss out because of your lack of participation, because he wants you to impact others, not just to be impacted.

My family began attending Kenwood 16 years ago this month. As parents, Dawn and I knew we needed a strong, loving church community to help raise our children. I want to thank those of

you here at Kenwood for blessing my family. You've done that for 16 years. And the blessing continues to this day. Our youngest, Hailey, who was only seven when we arrived here, is now twenty-three. She spent the past summer jobless. She had prayerfully decided to not renew her teaching contract and was without work for several months with no prospects in sight. This could have been a perilous, stress-filled, depressing summer for her, but the church community made all the difference. Hailey did not feel alone in her troubles.

Here at Kenwood, many of you asked her every week about her job search. You prayed for her and with her. As I was preparing this sermon, Hailey told me about ways she felt authentically cared for and loved by this community. Here are just two of many examples: Lydia Davis, Hailey's long-time mentor, shared about her own unemployment experiences and what God had taught her through them. Christine Palmer spent time with Hailey this summer, prayed for Hailey, and constantly provided encouragement. The broader church community played a role as well. Hailey lives in Norwood with a group of Christian girls in a house. In that community, there are many young Christians. They shared their stories, prayed, and held Hailey accountable to continue seeking employment and to continue seeking the Lord.

Through it all, Hailey felt safe in the midst of great uncertainty. The experience did not harm her. It actually helped her, and when God finally brought the job itself (one that is an amazing fit and was completely unexpected), it happened also on these grounds during the reception at Lydia's wedding when connections were made and people again asked her about what was going on in her life. Of course, Dawn and I did all we could for Hailey. But, as parents, what a joy to see how our children are blessed through this church community.

This is how the church operates when it is established on Jesus Christ, when its members love and care for one another, when we hold each other accountable, when we reach into the lives of others to help and encourage them. Churches are populated by imperfect human beings—we all know that—but when we together follow and obey our perfect Savior, we become an unstoppable force to restore and remake this world – and each other – for good.

As an elder, I long for every person who enters these doors to experience what we've experienced and what many of you have experienced in this community. What is a church? *It is a community of people who **prevail together over life's perils**.* A Christian is never meant to go it alone.

PASTOR DAVID:

We have two pieces of our answer so far: The church is a community of people who share an answer to the ultimate question of "Who is Christ," and the church is a community of people who prevail together over life's perils. Now we look at the second passage in the New

Testament gospels about the church. That is Matthew 18:12-28. This passage begins with a parable, one the most common ways that Jesus teaches. A parable invites you into a story and calls forth a response. Parables are not moral fables, like *Aesop's Fables*. They are, in fact, prophetic encounters that turn your worldview upside down so that you can live right side up. I have learned to brace myself when I hear Jesus start a parable because the parable will confront me. It will challenge me in some radical and profound ways. So, are you ready for this parable? Jesus is coming after us. He starts with "What do you think?" The incarnate Son of God says: "What do you think?" And then he starts a parable. It seems so simple, so safe. It's about sheep! What could be dangerous about it a sheep parable? Jesus' little parable just begins in Matthew 18:12:

"If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?"

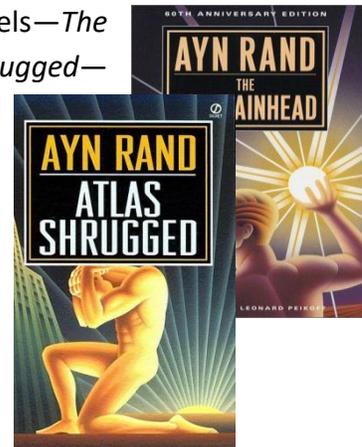
What do you think? Does he? Should he? He has 99 safely on the mountain. Why should he risk his well-being for one who is gone astray? You have 99 flourishing investments and one tanks, just write it off. You have 100 friends on Facebook and one turns out to be a loser, just defriend that one and move on. Should he? That's what Jesus is pressing into. Some of us without realizing it are influenced by other thinkers. We have a worldview that's already set in place that we picked up, not from Jesus, but from our society. Sometimes the shaping forces of our society have names and faces. Some of them, though, we don't even know that are affected by.

Many of us in this room are affected by this woman even though we might not know her name.



Her name is Ayn Rand, and she was a writer, thinker, novelist, widely popular in the 20th century. Two of her most significant novels—*The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*—

were made into movies recently. *Atlas Shrugged* has the dubious distinction of being one of the 10 worst-performing films in



the box office, so you probably didn't see it. But the novels continue to be bestsellers. Ayn Rand's way of thinking is called *objectivism*. I was given *Atlas Shrugged* in high school. It was the

biggest book I've ever been given. I read it as a non-Christian. It made sense to me. It challenged me, and I thought she was very wise and profound. But, Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism radically disagrees with Jesus' parable. Ayn Rand says:

"The proper method of judging whether one should help another person is by reference to one's own rational self-interest, one's own hierarchy of values. The time, money, or effort one

gives, or the risk one takes, should be proportionate to the value of the person in relation to one's own happiness.”

She goes further in her essay on “The Ethics of Emergencies,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*. She says:

“Let me take the issue of the altruist’s favorite example of saving a drowning person: If the person to be saved is a stranger, it is morally proper to save him only when the danger to one’s own life is minimal; when the danger is great, it would be immoral to attempt it: only a lack of self-esteem could permit one to value one’s life no higher than that of any random stranger.”

Can you imagine a world where you see someone drowning and you do quick self-assessment: Is my life worth risking for that person? You decide “no, no, it’s more,” and all the people around you congratulate you on how highly you think of yourself. We can see this with Ayn Rand, but we would not long to be part of a society like that. It is critical, life-giving, for us to know that the Jesus community, the church, is built on an entirely different plan.

The Jesus community says: “If a man has 100 sheep and one of them wanders off, goes astray, then you leave the safety of the mountainside and you go after the one who's wandered away and is missing.” That sheep is in danger, vulnerable, alone, isolated. Maybe he became convinced for a moment that he knew better, he knew a shortcut around the mountain. Maybe the sheep became bored by the droning voice of the same shepherd and sought a new sound. Maybe the sheep became distracted and missed that last gentle turn. Whatever the circumstance, this sheep is in danger, isolated, vulnerable, alone. Maybe his marriage is in trouble. Maybe the power of a destructive addiction is taking hold of his soul. Maybe he's compromising his convictions in the classroom or the board room in order to get ahead. Maybe he's looking too long, staying too late, drinking too much. Maybe his career is more important than his children. Whatever it is, the shepherd notices: “We’re missing someone,” and he risks everything and goes after him. That's the Jesus community. The Jesus community follows the shepherd in going after the one who's missing. In the Parable of the Shepherd, when he finds it, Jesus says he rejoices over it more than over the 99 who never went astray. The Jesus community, the church, is characterized by this tremendous joy in recovering the lost. Jesus says in Matthew 18:14:

“So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Everyone matters in the Jesus community. Jesus is the Shepherd and his followers follow him. So, what is the Church? In Matthew 18, the church, thirdly, is a community of people who are sent on search and rescue. The church is not a community who stands safely at a distance, but it is those who lovingly and relentlessly pursue those who've wandered away, whatever the

reason. The reason doesn't matter. What matters is you have wandered off, that you are in danger, and that I love you enough to risk my own safety that you might be found. Which community do you want to be part of? The Jesus community asks real questions—How are you doing? and then follows up. They have the courage also to confront people when obvious sin has taken place.

Jesus continues to teach us in Matthew 18:15:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

Here's a second going. The Jesus community does not just go after the one who was lost on the mountainside. The Jesus community goes after the one who has been gripped by some kind of obvious sin in their life, which wreaks havoc in our lives. Notice a couple of things. First notice the family language: “If your brother, if your brother or your sister. . .” So this is about family conversations. Jesus does not authorize the church to judge the world here. That's really an important distinction, because what happens if you don't obey Jesus in this way, then you use your God-given capacity for this to judge people you don't even know, and Christians are scolded by those outside the church for being judgmental because we are not using this apparatus as Jesus decided it to be used. Our frequent judging of others is a misdirected outcome of not obeying Jesus' specific command here.

Secondly, notice that the sin involves you: “If your brother sins against you.” The church community, the Jesus family, does not spend its energy searching for sin randomly in the community, but it's a sin that you are affected by or know or are intimately aware of. So, if this happens, then Jesus says that you go. Notice that you go first in private. The honor of the person is guarded with care. Jesus does not tell us to talk to others when a brother or sister sins against us. We make this mistake, don't we? Someone sins against us, and we say: “Hey, Fred, can I just tell you what Wayne did to me?” We talk not to the brother or the sister. We talk to someone else. Why? Because we're afraid to talk to the person? Because we want to stroke our ego to say: “I want you to agree with me that this was wrong?” That's not the Jesus way. The Jesus community has a set of private, confrontational, or, as Jeff Wallace says, “care-frontational” (I love that!) conversation where acts of love happen in a healthy family. In a healthy church there these private conversations and people work this out. It's really powerful, and we grow together. The offender should be spoken with and not about. But, sometimes it doesn't seem to have an immediate effect, and yet the love of God does not stop pursuing us. Jesus says in Matthew 18:16:

“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

Jesus echoes the clear teaching of Deuteronomy 19, that truth in this way is not just opinion-based, but you take two or three others. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:19, Paul says:

“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

It’s not a small thing. Jesus says you go with two or three others, and notice that the sinful person in the Jesus community deserves the time, the effort, the patience, and the process involved in this.

Sometimes we don't confront sin because we're afraid. Sometimes we don't confront it because we're lazy. You go with two or three, and things can change, and reconciliation happens. Sometimes it still doesn't happen there, and Jesus says in Matthew 18:17:

“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

The community as a whole seeks to help. It is the responsibility of the community to help us see when we are wrong and we are hurting people. Even though this may seem scary or dangerous, deep down we actually long for this. It grieves us when there is sin in an organization that is just covered over, instead of lovingly confronted so that forgiveness can be sought and reconciliation happens. We need, as the church, to have the integrity, honesty, and courage to speak the truth. Scripture says: *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”* When we don't do this, we take this God-given capacity and we just gossip. So check yourself. If I'm gossiping, then I'm not obeying Jesus and I'm hurting others more. If I'm judging people, then I'm not obeying Jesus and I'm hurting people yet more. Jesus ends his teaching by saying in Matthew 18:18:

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

This language of binding and loosing tells us that the church has a visible expression on the earth of the heavenly reality. Notice that heaven and earth are connected in the church. This is the place where the life of heaven, the joys of heaven, the forgiveness of heaven, are experienced. I wept this morning in our worship time. I wept because of the lyrics announcing that as Jesus in the grave began to breathe, and I knew that my sins were totally forgiven. You can't be told that at the mall. You can find that out only here. There's a heaven and earth connection here, and then Jesus uses this language of binding and loosing, which may seem really obscure but was crystal clear to everyone who lived in the first century.

This language of binding and loosing is used in Jesus' day to describe the community who exert themselves to understand the will of God and to do it. We have an echo of this usage in English when whenever we say we are duty bound for something. It means I'm obligated, I am attached to a commitment. It's like when you take a vow or make a promise and you are say I'm binding myself to do that. Even simply stated, when you say, “I will meet you at 12:15,” I'll be there, and

you just restricted your freedom in one sense and made a commitment. The Jesus community delights in commitments, especially the ones that are the will of God. What are we bound to and where are we free? This language gives us tremendous joy and freedom in this life. I love discovering God's will and learning it together. We learn it by studying the Scriptures and understanding them together, and then encouraging each other to put those Scriptures into practice.

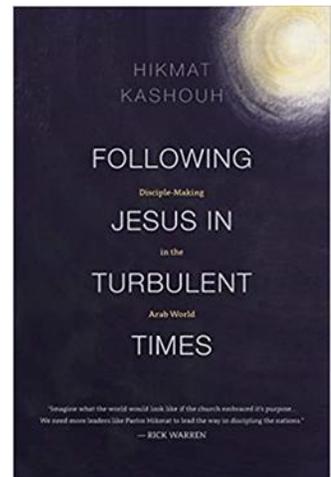
The fourth feature of the church in these two passages is that the church is a community of people that seek to understand and do God's will. Matthew 16 and 18 give us in these two texts four shared features: it's a community of people, the fingers inside (in the illustration of the nursery rhyme), that ultimately matter, and those fingers inside are people who share an answer to this question, Who is Jesus? They together prevail over life's perils, that they together are sent on search and rescue, and they are a people seeking to understand and do God's will.

So, why church? The church really matters. To help us, we like to read around here, and we like to read from voices in the global church, because you know the church isn't just an American phenomenon. I met a pastor last summer while a team from Kenwood was in Beirut. I met



Pastor Hikmat Kashouh, pastor of Resurrection Church in Beirut, his wife Krista and their three children Daniella, Betine, and Marcus. The Resurrection Church is a church that has grown from about 70 people to about 1300 in the last few years, and 70% of those people are refugees and come from Muslim backgrounds. Many have come from Syria. If you are

unfamiliar with the political history in recent years, let me just remind you that Lebanon and Syria were engaged in a long-term war with each other. So these refugees who poured across the border were recent enemies of the Lebanese, and it was the church who loved them. This church, the Resurrection Church, is a beautiful expression of the body of Christ, and Pastor Hikmat wrote a book called *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times*. This will be our January read. It is a very powerful picture of a church that is living as the body of Christ. Part of this short book is describing what happens in a community who starts to follow Jesus. I can't think of a more exciting and meaningful life to live than among such a group of people.



I want to share a story that I learned from Pastor Hikmat that illustrates for me why church. He shares this:

“On Sunday November 22, 2015, a gentleman from Sudan approached me after church, introduced himself as Brother Yassir. He mentioned the name of a common friend who had advised him to attend our church. I happened to be free for lunch, and so I invited him to join my family and a few friends at a nearby restaurant. Over the meal, he shared his story with us.

“He came from a family of devout Sunni Muslims. One of his uncles played a major role in starting the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan, and another was one of the top chiefs in the secret service in northern Sudan.

“When Yassir was only eight years old, his father took him to a religious school far from his home and left him there. He did not know whether his father would ever return for him. For two years, Yassir attended that school, memorizing the Qur’an, and being radicalized by his Sunni teachers. Then, two years later, his father showed up and took him home.

“Back home, Yassir attended the local school. There he met a Christian boy called Zachariah, who was the first in his class and used to sit next to him. Yassir regarded him as an infidel. So one day he and a friend took Zachariah into the forest and set about beating him to death. After breaking his bones, they left him there to die.

“Yassir’s family were also involved in persecuting Christians. In fact, one day, his uncle was sent to arrest a pastor. When he arrived at the church, he decided to wait until the service was over before making the arrest. Meanwhile the preacher, not knowing what was going to happen, was preaching from the book of Acts, telling the story of Saul’s conversion. At the end of the service, Yassir’s uncle went up to the pastor and asked him, ‘Why were you preaching about me and sharing my stories?’ The pastor explained that he was telling a story from the Bible, but Yassir’s uncle did not believe him until the pastor opened the book of Acts and read it to him. Yassir’s uncle was captured by the power of the word of God and stayed until early the next morning asking the pastor questions. The conversation ended with Yassir’s uncle giving his life to Jesus. His conversion, led to his being put in prison, yet there he was very active in evangelizing and many came to faith because of him.

“One day, Yassir’s cousin became very sick which led to his being admitted to the hospital in a coma. His father could not go to him, for he was in prison, but he arranged for two Christian men to go to the hospital to pray for his son. The men arrived while Yassir was there, visiting his unconscious cousin. Yassir watched as the two messengers went inside to pray for the boy. When they had finished praying, he saw the boy open his eyes, start to remove all the tubes attached to him, and on the same day the boy was healed and went out to play. Yassir was dumbstruck. How could the prayers of two infidels be heard by God, and how come God responded by granting them a miracle? He decided that he needed to learn more about

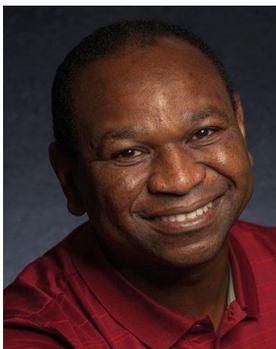
Christianity. He went home and started to read once again all that was written about Jesus in the Qur'an and in Islamic traditions.

"To cut a long story short, Yassir ended up giving his life to Jesus. As a result, his family disowned and abandoned him. More than that, they went to a graveyard and put his name on a grave as a sign that he was dead to them. Rejected and persecuted, Yassir decided to leave Sudan. Before leaving, he went and stood by his 'grave' and wept and wept. He loved his parents and was in agony that they had rejected him. It was the darkest moment in his entire life.

"As he was standing there, he felt a hand touching his shoulder and a voice said, 'Yassir, don't cry; your grave is empty and so is mine.' He felt God's amazing presence, and a calling from God to go and serve him and witness to the resurrection. He left Sudan, continued his studies in Islamic Studies and Jurisprudence, and earned an MA from Columbia University. Today he is a lecturer and pastor of migrant churches in Germany for many years.

"Twenty-five years later, Yassir visited Egypt to teach at a pastors' conference. While speaking and sharing his testimony, he noticed that one pastor with a broken arm and a broken leg was in tears. After Yassir was finished, he went to this pastor and asked him why he had been weeping. The pastor, blind in one eye and physically fragile, told him, 'I am Zachariah, the little boy you beat twenty-five years ago.' Then Zachariah opened his Bible, and there on the first page of his Bible was the name of Yassir, written by the hand of the Christian teenager he had tried to kill. Zachariah said, 'Since that day, I have not stopped praying for you. It is wonderful to know that you now are a follower of Jesus.' Yassir himself was in tears now. As he stood in front of Zachariah and saw what the beating had done to him, and saw also his loving heart, he could only ask, 'What kind of religion can make one love an enemy so much!'"

Brothers and sisters, if there is a someone teaching people to live like this, then I want to follow them as well. If there is a group of people living like this in the world, then I want to be a part of it. If there is a team of humble, forgiven, prayerful, patient, people seeking to understand and to do God's will, then who would not want to be part of that?



"Here is the church. There is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people." When we look closely, one of those fingers, one of those fingers has the name of Eric Yassir. This is the Jesus community.

You may be wondering right now: "How can I be part of that? Is there room for me in that community?" The great news is that this morning all you really need to begin is the shared answer to that question: "Who is Jesus?" Maybe this morning you heard enough, saw enough about Jesus to say: "Jesus, I believe you are alive. I know no one else who does the things that you do." Who is Jesus? He is the Son

of God, the Son who came to seek and save the lost and to bind them together as a holy family, a sacred community, prevailing over life's perils, seeking and rescuing those who are wandering away, and understanding and doing God's will. If you can answer the question this morning, "Who is Jesus? He is the Son of God, I trust him," then you are welcome to feast with us as part of his family.

Hallelujah, Amen.