

“Moving on the Gates”  
Matthew 16:13-20

I was in Rome, Georgia, for our General Assembly, the annual meeting of our denomination, June 21-24. What can I say about that meeting? First, it was hot. On Wednesday the 21<sup>st</sup> the high was 63 degrees in Seattle. In Rome that day, it was 104. Let me tell you that 104 in Georgia is not like 104 in Arizona. The next day a cold front came through and we cooled off to a balmy 103. The good news is that I got a great deal on my rental car, which was a convertible. If you think about it, there’s a reason rental cars practically give away convertibles in Georgia in the month of June! Second, this Assembly marked our 25<sup>th</sup> year as a denomination, plus the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Presbyterianism in America. Where we’ve come from and where we’re headed was a major focus of our time together. Mark Noll, our generation’s foremost historian of American Christianity, spoke to us on Wednesday, June 21. He told us about times in history when the Presbyterian church was a major influence on American culture (establishing and promoting schools, hospitals, and other social services), as well as having a major impact for Christ in terms of evangelism and church planting. In assessing where we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Noll offered ways we can regain that impact for Christ.

We also received a paper from our denomination’s Long Range Planning committee, which is wrestling with how we “do church” in a post-Christian, postmodern, post 9-11 world. This became the main topic of informal conversations and meetings at this General Assembly: How do we “do church” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? I can tell you that we’re bullish on the church, we’re rich in foundational truth, we have creative and enthusiastic leadership. But we recognize that increasingly we’re “outsiders” speaking to an increasingly paganized culture. One of the reasons we’re outsiders is that as Christians, we think and talk in language that we understand, but few people outside the church understand. For example, most of us know what it means to be saved and sanctified by Jesus Christ. But do non-Christians? The answer is no. So how do we “do church,” how do we present and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ in this culture? As we grapple for answers, we recognize that we need to admit that if we are in a post-Christian, postmodern, post 9-11 era, then our country is now a mission field. That fact means we need to think in new and different ways about how we “do” church. At the same time, we recognize that we need to maintain continuity with the past, for in the past we’ve seen God faithfully and magnificently provide for His church. He’s given us “marching orders” that are timeless. We need to take those orders and apply them wisely, prudently to the opportunities and challenges before us. That brings us to our text today, as I want to talk about who we are, what I believe God’s calling us to in the months and years ahead at First EPC. From our passage, especially Jesus’ words in verse 18, come two points and then a conclusion with three parts.

First, Jesus said, “I will build my church.” God’s purpose for human history is this: He is gathering for Himself a group of people—men, women, boys, and girls—who will forever be with Him, and who will forever be the praise of His glory. That group of people is His church. That group, the gathering of that group is the greatest cause in human history, because it’s what God’s committed to doing through the centuries. No matter how hard or difficult or antagonistic the situation the church finds itself in, as believers in Jesus Christ we belong to a cause that will not fail, cannot fail. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jesus is building His church! Second, the church Jesus is building is on the move against the powers of sin and evil. Our Lord also says in verse 18 that the “gates of Hades” (or Hell) will not be able to overcome Christ’s church. The most common interpretation of this phrase is that the “gates of Hades” refers to attacks on the church by Satan and his demonic forces, and that this is Jesus’ promise that the evil one will not succeed. The idea here is that the church is on the defensive, the evil one is attacking it. The problem with this view is the word “gates,” which is a strange way to refer to a group’s strongest defensive position of that city against an attacking army. And so the “gates of Hades” is the strongest defensive position of the kingdom of darkness. The best way to understand Jesus’ words, “the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” is that hell will not be able to resist the forces of the church when the church is assaulting it, on the offensive, attacking it! I know this is a dramatically different understanding of the church than what we’re accustomed to, but it is the understanding of our Savior and Lord. The church Christ is building, that He’s leading is on the move, it’s on the offensive against the evil one. The question may be asked: how is it moving, how is it attacking? Is the grand strategy to identify weak spots in the forces of the enemy and exploit those weaknesses? No.

The answer to this question leads me to a statement of vision I believe the Lord has put on my heart, the heart of the Session, and I trust, He will put on your heart today and in the weeks and months ahead. That statement of vision is that God’s called us to move people closer to Jesus Christ. That’s the grand strategy: as

people are moving closer to Jesus, His church is moving on the gates of Hell. This is consistent with what Jesus is saying here in verse 18. The church Jesus is building isn't static and stagnant, it's dynamic, there's life and energy and vitality as it's reaching out, it's expanding, it's growing. The gospel the church proclaims is all about moving - God moving from heaven to this world, sending His own Son Jesus to bring us salvation. And the gospel is about people, His people—men, women, boys and girls—who do not know and believe in and love Jesus Christ. And the power of the Holy Spirit comes into their lives and they come to know and believe in and love Him. And in that great, life-changing moment, those who are saved move from sin to salvation, from death to life, from judgment and eternal condemnation to reward and eternal blessing.

A key assumption of doing church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that people who are not Christians will come to church because the culture they live in encourages going to church. So as non-Christians come to church they will hear the gospel and respond to it. That key assumption is wrong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We do not exist in a culture that encourages people to go to church. We're in an unchurched culture, we're in a mission field now. A key element of God's vision for us is to look outward and to move outward into the mission field that is south King County. To share with those who do not yet know Christ what we know and experience and enjoy in an effort to move them closer to our Savior and Lord. How do we best do that? At Bus Smith's memorial service yesterday we learned the motto of his life: "Don't say the gospel, display the gospel." That's it. "Don't say the gospel, display the gospel." Display the life, the love, the care, the compassion that are ours with those who don't yet know Jesus!

The good news is that as a church we're already doing that in a variety of ways. There's our outreach ministry to inmates at the Kent Jail. We're not only sharing the gospel on Sundays a couple of months a year, we're also following up to help and support those who need positive models and encouragement when they get out of jail. There's our team of volunteers working to settle Somalis in our area through World Relief. God has been moving and providing in some really exciting ways in that outreach to our east African friends. I hope to get Michael Madany before you in the coming weeks so he can share how God's moving through this ministry. In the past year, we've been given the opportunity to tangibly share the care and compassion of Jesus with students and staff at the Panther Lake Elementary School down the street. These are opportunities where we're moving into our community, opportunities we need to pursue further and build on in the months ahead. We also know we have a precious gospel and a beautiful facility at a highly visible location. Taking advantage of those blessings means going into our community and inviting people to our church. Our Vacation Bible School ministry this week is a great opportunity to do just that, to reach out into our community, not just to children 4 years old through sixth grade, but also their parents. Week in and week out our deacons are ministering help and healing and hope to hurting people in our community as well as in our church family. Away from our community we're on the move, too. One of the goals of our short-term mission trips each summer is that our young people and leaders will return from that trip with a new perspective on their world, that they'll see missions as not only something done "out there," but also in their own community. There's our Missions family scattered about the globe. There are missionaries from our own church family such as the Bardwells, Bennetts, Johnsons, Nichols, Robinsons, and Normans. And there are missionaries who aren't originally a part of our church that we support and encourage and love. In all these activities, we're working to move people who do not know Jesus closer to Him.

But the idea of moving people closer to Jesus Christ doesn't stop with helping those who don't know Jesus as Savior and Lord move closer to Him so that the Holy Spirit can grab them and convict them and bring them to the salvation that is found only in Him. This statement of vision also applies to believers, to you and me. Moving closer to Jesus Christ is another way of saying that we're about the business as Christians of what Ephesians 4:13 says is "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, God's call on your life is to move, to move closer to Jesus, to become more and more like Him as you live as His follower. We do that together as we're in closer connection with one another in Christ: God's love—and all that comes with that love—is increasingly on display; it's becoming more evident, more obvious in our life as time goes on. We're also moving closer to Jesus as we serve and minister to each other in Jesus' name, both within the church and without. This fall we're planning to offer some classes to equip and encourage closer connection and more active service in our church.

I'm under a conviction of our Lord that this is the work He's called us to as His church in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have an important part to play in the greatest cause of human history, a cause we know cannot fail, will not fail: following our Savior and Lord as we move on the gates of Hell itself proclaiming and promoting the glorious good news of Jesus Christ!