

SERMON FOR AUGUST 23, 2020

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples:

“Who do people say that *the Son of Man* is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do YOU say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”.

And Jesus answered him, “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.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,

and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Next to Jesus himself, Peter is my all-time favorite character in the Bible. When you think of someone that it would be great to just sit down and share a meal with, ask a question or two and then just sit back and listen to story after story, well, Peter is it for me. He starts out as just an ordinary guy – a fisherman. He’s not smart enough to be a student of a rabbi. He didn’t flunk Sunday School but he didn’t have that kind of brilliant mind it would have taken to memorize all of the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers AND Deuteronomy by the time he was 12. So no life as disciple of a famous rabbi on tenure track for Simon, as he was first called. He is a hard-worker though. He knows his fishing business well. And he is clearly a man of God. When Jesus, the rabbi, invites him to come and follow, well, Peter is overwhelmed with joy! To be asked to become a student of a rabbi seemed to be outside the realm of possibility for Peter – yet here was Jesus, calling out to him in the fourth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. He is first picked, along with his brother Andrew, to take up the call and follow Jesus. Each of the Gospels highlight Simon Peter, in one way or another. Not one Gospel holds all the stories though. You can get a slightly different angle on Peter’s person from each – and some similar stories too.

In our Following Jesus Together group we discovered that Matthew shines the spotlight on Peter 13 times. That is clear more attention than any other disciple gets, and each of the Gospel writers highlight Peter at least 10 times. After the Call, Matthew has Peter dragging Jesus to the house of his mother in law, so that Jesus can heal her of a fever. Today a church is constructed over the house in Capernaum, said to be Jesus “home away from home” – right there on the Sea of Galilee. Just a stone’s throw from the synagogue, Jesus seemed to find it a welcome place! And just a couple of weeks ago we remembered the time Jesus and Peter did some water-walking. Peter, brash enough to ask Jesus to prove who he was by asking Peter to come to him on the waves. Ah...Peter the adventuresome, the full-of-faith disciple who could let go of the gift of faith in a moment’s notice, today becomes to proclaimer of a confession of faith in Jesus the Christ.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell today’s story, of Peter boldly confessing Jesus to be Christos – the anointed, the messiah of God. And Jesus is so very proud of his student, pouring out blessing upon Simon, Son of Jonah – not because Simon Peter had aced the test and gotten the answer right himself. No! God had revealed Jesus’ identity to Peter – that is the only way he could know it!

The same Peter who is pronounced blessed this week will be called on the carpet next week – and Matthew shows us this disciple who tries to get it right with every fiber of his being, asking Jesus not to wash his feet but then when Jesus insists, instructing Jesus to wash his whole body as well and not just his feet! He vows his allegiance to Jesus claiming he will never desert his Lord and then denies even knowing Jesus in the courtyard while Jesus is being tried. But it could quite be that John’s gospel holds the best Peter story of all. It is following Jesus’ resurrection, and the guys have decided to go catch some fish – what else is there to do in the midst of the agony and grief of Jesus’ death on the cross....and they are out there in the boat and they are catching NOTHING.

Then this stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net over the other side of the boat and suddenly they draw up tons and tons of fish and Peter looks up and recognizes sees Jesus, he puts on his clothes and dives into the water to swim to shore. It is there, after breakfast, on that shore that the Risen Lord asks Peter the same question, three times: do you love me? To erase, one by one, the three times that Peter had denied him in that courtyard.

When you put all the stories of Peter together, it seems like Peter is just about the worst choice that Jesus could make as the foundation for his church – as the starter for this new community of faith that would enact God’s kingdom right here on earth. Yet that is exactly what Jesus told Simon Peter in today’s scripture: You are Peter, and on this ROCK I will build my church. A person who Jesus calls a rock – a human being suitable to be chosen to carry forward the mission of the Christ of God.

While the Temple in Jesus’ day was indeed hewn from stone, it seems that Jesus had a different idea for his church – a reality that it is pretty important for us to lift up today, in the midst of this global pandemic that keeps us from gathering in the stone or wood or much any kind of structure for worship as we normally would. Here and now we are reminded that the church is not about a building, as great as it is to gather in this space and praise God and share worship together. The church is built on imperfect individuals – each one of us – who just like Peter are filled with faith enough from the Holy Spirit one minute to announce that Jesus is the Christ – and the next minute we are overwhelmed with trying to figure out how to manage these Coronavirus days and sense impatience with the strictures of these days. One minute we are finding new ways to do faith formation through videos for families to participate in a deeper way than before and the next we are struggling to remember that it is hard for everybody to enter the technology world in the same way. Rocks that Jesus calls us, faith filled lovers of God, and frustrated long-ers for the “way we used to be”!

Maybe the reason Jesus started with the likes of Peter as his first disciple is so that none of us would ever disqualify ourselves. For if Peter was fit for the foundation, certainly there is a place we can fit, too. And knowing the love of God for the likes of me and each of us, we are confident in sharing a warm and loving welcome to all who have had the Father reveal to them what we know to be true: Jesus is the Christos, the Son of the Living God, who grants us, like Peter both great faith and the permission to reach out for His hand when that faith wobbles!

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