



“On This Rock”

Scripture – Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, September 3, 2017

The lands of the Bible and the Early Church are scattered with remnants. These are remnants of holy sites, churches or temples or shrines that have often been lost to the ages. Some of them have crumbled completely, leaving mere reminders of what once stood strong. Others are still mostly intact, although certainly worse for wear. But in all cases, whether or not the building has endured the test of time, one thing remains: the foundation, the rock on which it was built.

In our Scripture lesson today, Jesus issues a blessing unique to the Gospel of Matthew. “I tell you, you are Peter,” he says. More accurately: “I tell you, you are *petros* – you are ‘rock’. And on this rock, I will build my church.”

This verse has quite the legacy. Historically, it has been one of the Bible’s most contested verses – thanks largely to the role it’s played in undergirding Catholic doctrine. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has viewed Jesus’ promise to Peter as one basis for the Pope’s authority. Protestants have shot back: “No, no, no – It is not Peter himself, but Peter’s *faith* that is the foundation of the church!” However you interpret this verse, it is clear that – in this passage – Peter becomes something of an example – a model of Christian discipleship. Jesus praises his confession of faith, blesses him as one who understands divine things, and promises him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Now some of us might be thinking: “Really? Peter? Are we talking about the same guy?”

Isn’t Peter the one who Jesus chastised in the story we read just three weeks ago? You remember – that night when the disciples were out on the lake and the waves were battering the boat and the wind was blowing, and Jesus walked to them on the water. Peter was eager to do the same thing. He stepped outside the boat, but he got scared. “You of little faith,” Jesus said, “why did you doubt?”

And, if we keep reading, he’s the disciple who Jesus scolds just a few verses later. When Peter refuses to believe that the Messiah must suffer and die, Jesus erupts: “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”

And, how could we forget? The reason most of us remember Peter ... the one who denied Christ. His reputation is forever tied to that fateful night – a reputation born of his persistent faults, his empty allegiance. “Truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you – Peter – you will deny me three times.”

Correct me if I’m wrong – but isn’t Peter a bit unreliable? Couldn’t Jesus have picked a rock that was more stable, less likely to wobble when the ground shifted or the pressure changed? Is this really the best succession plan? If

Jesus is going to entrust the church with continuing his work, couldn't he have picked a more promising protégé? Maybe a leader who could walk on water *without* sinking ... or a teacher who understands that Christ has to die and rise again ... or, hey, somebody who can at least stay awake to pray.

And yet, it is Peter whom Jesus blesses: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." In this moment – when the Spirit opens Peter's eyes to see the Messiah standing before him so that he can confess what he knows to be true – in this moment, Jesus makes a way for his ministry to continue. He chooses Peter as a foundation, as a leader of the church that Christ will build.

And there is hope in this choice. For as flawed as Peter is, he strives always to love Christ. Even in the moments when he seems destined to disappoint, we glimpse his desire to please.

You see – when Jesus walked to the disciples on the water, when he called Peter to step out of the boat, it was because Peter asked. "Lord," Peter said, "if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

And when Jesus rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me Satan!" it was because Peter rebuked him first. So troubling to him is the thought of Jesus' suffering and death, that Peter takes him aside: "God forbid it! This must never happen to you."

And even on that fateful night when Peter denied Christ, even on that night we glimpse his love for the Lord. Do you remember the conversation? Jesus warned his disciples that they would *all* become deserters – every last one of them – and it was Peter who protested. "Not I Lord, I will never desert you." Imagine the guilt he felt when he heard the rooster crow. The crushing weight of it must have overwhelmed him, enough that he went out and wept bitterly.

Even the moments we point to as evidence of Peter's imperfection are examples of his commitment to Christ. It is his eagerness that gets him into trouble, his tendency to reach out to Jesus, to cling to Jesus before realizing the risk involved.

In some ways, isn't that what gets us into trouble too? Do we find ourselves bursting to say: "yes!" to Jesus before realizing everything that that entails? I think Peter is actually the perfect rock on which to build the church. He's the perfect foundation, the perfect spokesperson, precisely because he is so imperfect. With all of his strengths and all of weaknesses, he represents each of us – ordinary Christians striving to follow Christ.

When I travel I enjoy visiting churches to see how the stories of different communities are reflected in their buildings. Some churches have a font a parishioner made; some have a pew where a notable person sat; some have a stained-glass window that tells us something of the faith that community holds dear. During one trip, I was surprised to find churches that have roosters on their rooftops. I'm not talking about a real live rooster that flies up there to wake the village. I'm talking about an image of a rooster – a weathercock; specifically, one that sits atop the steeple in place of a cross. It turns out these weathercocks have adorned church buildings for hundreds of years. Largely because the rooster is associated with Peter.

It seems poetic that our very buildings can capture the dual nature of discipleship. Every stone that makes up these churches sits between the rock that is the foundation and the rooster that signals our brokenness, the rock that holds us steady and the rooster that calls us to repentance.

This is the story of the church. Like Peter, we are always living in the tension between strength and weakness, boldness and fear, loyalty and betrayal, faith and doubt. We are imperfect people who have found a perfect love in Christ, and we do our best to tell the tale.

But we do so with confidence and with hope because Christ binds us together. He is the one who builds the church, laying stone upon stone. It is Christ who gives us words to proclaim from the pulpit, who welcomes us at the font, who lays food on the table. It is Christ who stands at the door, sending us out to make disciples and to teach his commandments. It is Christ who calls us, and equips us, and who offers us grace when we fall short. With all of our strengths and all of our weaknesses, Christ builds us up to be his body to continue his work.

Time and again, we see Christ at work in the life of the church.

I saw this last April, at our congregation's Easter Vigil Service. In a community of pilgrim people that had no idea what to expect, but who joined in a journey through salvation's story. And for many, it was wandering in a wilderness of sights and sounds well outside our usual experience of worship. Yet, crammed into a chapel that could barely hold us all, this community opened themselves to the leadership of children, to the Word coming to life in drama and dance, to the Spirit at work in story and song.

I see this whenever I share the Lord's Supper with members who are confined to Retirement Homes or Rehab Centers. Christ is at work in halting liturgy and feeble voices lifted in song ... in a ritual of serving bread from paper plates that have taken the place of pottery broken long ago. But, as we share the bread and the cup, we taste and see that the Lord is good. It is an experience of communion that can only be described as holy.

I see this in prayers that flow from the heart, even when the right words do not. And, in offering plates filled with gifts set aside from Social Security checks and stretched family budgets. And, in hands that can do little alone joining together to help others build or *rebuild* their lives. And, in people who doubt their gifts, but who still say 'yes' when called upon to serve.

In all these things, the Spirit moves. Time and again Christ shapes our songs and our prayers, our service and our proclamation into worship and witness that ripples out to bless the world. Friends, this is the story of the church — A story of Christ transforming chaos into holy chaos ... of God turning flawed attempts into faithful witness ... of the Spirit at work in imperfect people striving to love the Lord.

"I tell you, you are Peter. And on this rock, I will build my church." Thanks be to God who uses *us*, with all our strengths and all our weaknesses, to continue Christ's work in the world.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, we gather this morning to glean a word for our lives. We pray that we may tune out distractions and lower our defenses, so that we may detect your stirring in our soul.

God, some come in need of a word of comfort. Life has been harsh and inflicted bruises. They need your tender touch and the love of a friend.

Some come in need of a word of challenge. Life has lost its vitality and joy. They need to hear your summons to break out of stale routines.

Some are in need of a word of forgiveness. They are weary of making excuses and defending their actions. They need help converting their contrariness to positive action.

Some yearn for a word of hope. Life constantly conspires against them and the future holds little promise. They need assurance that something new is ahead and a reminder that you are an old hand at bringing light out of darkness.

Many come in need of a deeper faith. Their tie with you is tepid and their spiritual life is thin. They need to respond to Jesus' question – Who do you say I am? – as resolutely as Peter.

We know that you expect all of us to respond in faith not only with words, but especially with action. Inspire a desire within us to live in Christ-like ways.

Gracious God, whenever Jesus encountered people in need, he responded with kindness, mercy and compassion, awaken us to the opportunities that present themselves each day so that we may experience the joy of touching others with these same affections.

God, Texas and Louisiana have been devastated by Hurricane Harvey and torrential rains. The destruction of property overwhelms comprehension and the loss of life is heartbreaking. We pray that the victims will turn to you for the grit to endure these trying days, for the determination to move forward in the best way possible, and for the hope that – despite the despair of today – better days are ahead.

God of Wonders, we are deeply grateful for heroic acts that saved many from perishing and for the outpouring of generosity to help people survive these agonizing days. It is inspiring to see that when someone is desperate for help, responders do not contemplate someone's political party or race or religion or sexual orientation or income. They simply respond to human need with their best efforts – the same as Jesus would.

Lord of all, we pray not only for those within the borders of our nation, but also for your children around the globe who suffer. We pray for the people of Bangladesh, India, and Nepal where flooding has killed more than 1,200; and for the people of Sierra Leone where flooding and mudslides have taken the lives of more than 1,000. We pray that all will find strength and support to survive their losses, and that the generosity of others will help them rebuild their lives.

Help us to know, O God, that in you we can find the determination to withstand the ferocity of harsh winds and you can stiffen our resolve not to be swept away by raging waters.

Help us to know, that you will never leave us, and we can discover in you the wisdom and courage we need to handle the storms of life. Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, **“Our Father…”**