

August 21, 2014

“On This Rock”

Isaiah 51:1-3 Matthew 16:13-20

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Blessed are you Simon Bar Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

We would need several weeks of sermons to study and unpack what is so densely and concisely included in this short passage. There are many themes that could be explored; the significance of Christ re-naming Peter, the meaning of the name, the image of the rock and its permanence, the concept of the church and its solidity on earth, the image of the keys as access to a larger spiritual reality, and the deep and prevailing connection between heaven and earth. Now, that’s just too much for one morning’s sermon. But I imagine since you are sitting there and I am standing here, that you are expecting me to give it my best shot and push forward into the unknown.

Let’s start with what we do know. What do we know about the Apostle Peter, the subject of this passage? We know that he was an uneducated and rather ordinary man named Simon. We know that he was a Galilean fisherman, strong and weathered. We know that on a morning long ago, perhaps much like this one, Jesus called him and his brother Andrew and two others, James and John, to simply leave their boats and nets and follow him. We know that by some mysterious quirk of fate, they did. We know

that fishermen from Galilee were not very high on the Judean social scale and would never have been predicted as candidates to save Israel and defeat the Roman Empire. But beginning with Peter, this holy, if motley, assortment of human beings, which was to impact history forever, began to take form.

We meet this man, Simon Peter, upon whom Jesus bestows the future of his church, over and over again in the Gospels (as well as in the book of Acts) as he struggles to understand what he sees and hears and feels as he accompanies Jesus throughout his ministry. Peter listened to the parables and questioned their meaning. He was one of only three disciples present at the transfiguration. He saw Jesus heal his Mother-in-law, feed the 5000, confront the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and calm the troubled seas. And Jesus never treated him with kid gloves. No, over and over, Jesus rages at Peter for his lack of understanding with phrases such as, “O, man of little faith, why did you doubt?” and, “Get behind me, Satan, You are a hindrance to me.”

In his 1986 book, *I Been There Before*, David Carkeet paints an intriguing fictional story of the great Mark Twain coming back to earth in the 1985 comet. You may remember that Mark Twain was, in real life, born shortly after Halley’s comet in 1835 and died the day after its return in 1910. In Carkeet’s book, Samuel Clemens is taken by two of St. Peter’s hench-angels and brought before the judgment seat in heaven. There St. Peter, in an effort to help Mr. Clemens forgive himself for the mistakes of his first life, shares some of the less impressive, if not downright shameful events of

his own. He speaks in that folksy, no-nonsense style, which our man from Hannibal, Mo. could readily appreciate.

You know me, Sam. Why, I was the Tom Sawyer of the apostles—brash, impulsive, a backslider, a hooky player, and, more often than not, a muggins. There I am, in the gospels, for all to read, trying to walk on the water and then getting chicken-hearted, and Jesus having to pluck me out with a rebuke that made my ears burn. There I am, asking Jesus to explain a parable and getting snapped at again for being such a punkinhead. And there I am again, trying to get on His good side, trying to cheer Him up when He was forecasting His crucifixion; says I, “No, Lord, this isn’t going to happen to You.” Know what He said? It wasn’t too flattering. He said, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Well, when the Lord says something like that to you it takes the sand right out of you. Try it some time, if you don’t believe me...

He went on to tell of his behavior at the end of Jesus’ life, falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus had asked him to wait, cutting off the guards ear when they came to get Jesus, and fearfully denying Jesus three times as Jesus had predicted.

Now, I ask you, have you ever heard of such out-and-out-gumptionlessness? But for days after that—depressed? That’s not a strong enough word for it. All I could think about was how I had been with Jesus every day, and seen Him perform miracle after miracle, and seen His love,—a love so perfect it just had to be divine—and then, in the end, I had let Him down. I felt as if I had crucified Him. That’s right. I thought I had killed Him. But I got over it. You see, I got to thinking about the way Jesus’d said I would deny Him. He didn’t say it in a mean way, or with any kind of bitterness. He didn’t snap it at me either, for a change. He said it just as calm as you please. I think I know why. He was saying, “Peter, you’re human;

that means that you're a blunderer; here's an example—you're going to deny me; that's just the way people are...

Well, thinking along those lines cheered me up considerable. By and by I stopped kicking myself. I even began to feel good about myself. I went on to have a real gaudy career—got published in the Bible, got canonized and got put in charge of the keys to the gates here. Why, Jesus even went and built His church on me, “the rock”—it's the only joke He ever told, really, and He'd been so sober, all along, that it caught us all by surprise, and it didn't occur to us to laugh, but looking back on it, I think it's a prime pun. Now, doesn't that tell you something, Sam? Of all the apostles, He singled out the blunderingest as the cornerstone of his Church.

There may indeed be a subtle Divine humor in the words of today's scripture passage. “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” God is obviously not a perfectionist. He seems to have some fun with paradox and finds obvious pleasure in taking us poor self-centered humans by surprise. Well, in any event, it comes to pass that Simon is renamed Peter, which in Greek “petra” means rock, and in this moment the future of the world is sealed forever. Like Abram, who God renamed Abraham, which means “father of a multitude,” Peter has now been formally commissioned to play a huge role in salvation history. The keys are passed and it is up to this faulty and fallible man to communicate the message Christ brought to the world.

We have before us two images that might be clues to this cosmic puzzle. We have the image of the rock and that of the keys. On the one hand, the rock is the primordial image of permanence and stability, reliability and rigidity and on the other hand, the keys are an ancient image, which suggests the powers of opening and closing, binding and loosing, of liberation. So

which is it, unchangeable permanence or dynamic movement, the rock or the keys, strong tradition or creative evolution?

The Catholic Church has taken this image of Peter as the rock and turned it into a firm and formal Apostolic Succession. They formalized it, making Peter into the titular head at the beginning of a direct line of ecclesiastical power—the top of the triangle of power. They created a Pope, and cardinals and bishops, etc. etc. What does it mean to us Protestants to see Peter as the rock upon whom Christ bestows the future of his church. This pivotal moment in salvation history—this renaming and this passing on of the keys to the kingdom all turns on one important line, Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Peter saw with an internal vision that drew not only from outside himself but also from within and so he participated in creating the reality, which he was able to declare. This empowered his future living. After Christ’s death and resurrection, Peter went on to build the church. He was imprisoned and beaten. Later, imprisoned once again, he was mysteriously freed from his chains by angels and eventually, around 66 CE, he was martyred for his faith. But even here he was determined to have an impact on the means of his execution by courageously asking to be crucified upside down to clearly distinguish his death from that of Jesus. Peter’s internal divinely inspired vision brought the church into being. He was not just a passive and acquiescent presence, not just a set of hands put into motion to do Christ’s work. Peter actively imagined the truth that would rock the world.

None of us passively receive the realities we experience in our lives. We bring an internal vision to the external reality in which we live and function. Our vision determines the landscape of our lives. Outside events, time, place, education, cultural and religious norms, don't determine who we are though they make a tremendous impact on us. If we truly believed they determined our being we would be complete materialists, slamming the door tightly against the entrance of the spirit. No, though the spark of the spirit may appear quite dim in most of us, it is not extinguished. The human imagination and the human will are gifts of God—head, heart and hands. That is the message of Christ that makes our Christian faith live and breathe.

Peter's life gives us an image of a real human being; one who allows his mistakes and failures, his doubts and questions, his misunderstandings and even his fears to truly work on him—to humble him, to disturb him, even to drag him through the necessary dark night of the soul in order to hone his spirit and to prepare him for greatness. This is the dynamic ever-changing quality of faithfulness. This is the persistent evolutionary movement, which lies deep inside the rock of salvation. This is the balance of the rock and the keys.

On the Communion table this morning you see two faces carved in stone. Each 12th grader in my daughters' high school, as part of the curriculum, is required to attempt the task of bringing his or her imagination and will to bear upon a piece of stone. In earlier years they prepared for this time by sculpting in the softer substances of wood and soapstone. Here, in the sculpting of a human face in this stone in their final year of high school, each must use his or her internal vision to see what the rock can be—to find

the life within it. Here, dynamic movement and elemental permanence meet and create Art. The great artist and sculptor, Michelangelo, once said, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” Isaiah said, “Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug.” We each must find the living interior in the rock of our religion—the spirit within it. We must embrace the kind of honest, attentive and compassionate living that Christ, through the image of Peter, calls each of us to live. For we, too, are like Peter and on this pile of rocks, in Arvada, Colorado-- on all of us, “muggins” and “blunderers,” Christ has built, and will continue to build, his church.