

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
August 23, 2020 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost

We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.

Lessons for Pentecost 12

Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Ah ... the ups and downs of discipleship. A couple weeks ago, we saw Peter sinking like a rock in the Sea of Galilee, getting a helping hand from Jesus. Today, Peter is a rising disciple, getting a rousing complement from Jesus: "I tell you, you are Peter and, on this rock, I will build my church." In the Greek Biblical text, there is a noticeable word play: in Greek, Peter is "Petros", rock is "petra". Peter's connection to a rock has always been as close as his name, now Jesus makes this connection explicit.

So, how did Peter come to this point and what did Jesus mean by saying – "on this rock, I will build my church."?

Matthew wants us to know where this all takes place. Jesus and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi. The city was established by the Herods as a tribute to the Emperor (Caesar) Augustus. The city was also the site on an important shrine dedicated to the god, Pan. People came to this city to show their esteem for a Roman leader or a Greek god. Now, in this later stage of his ministry, in this city where others are worshipped, Jesus wants to know what the people are thinking about him. He asks his disciples: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Of course, now days, we are much more scientific with our polling, but Jesus is content just to hear from his disciples. The disciples report: "*some say, John the Baptist, but others Elijah, still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*" That sounds good, people have sensed something special about Jesus. They put him in pantheon of religious non-conformists and prophets – those willing to speak out boldly for God. Good to hear what the people say, but Jesus turns to the disciples again: – "But you, who do you say that I am?" Yes, the disciples are the insiders. Jesus has spent more time with them; he has taken time to explain parables to them; they have seen him in action, they have seen him in prayer. "Okay, close friends, okay disciples, what do you say? ***Who do you say that I am?***"

Let's step out of the Gospel narrative for a moment and ponder this question addressed to disciples long ago. It is still a question for disciples today. What do we say about Jesus? *Who do we say Jesus is?* I remember a few months back, we asked a young member of our congregation, Connor Czincila, to step forward publicly and affirm his faith in Jesus, the One whose Cross had been traced on his forehead at Baptism. Connor answered the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" by affirming his faith in Jesus that day. But this question is hardly a question for one person, for one day. All of us who carry the Cross on our foreheads, have an opportunity to answer the question ***every day*** with our thoughts, words and deeds.

Okay, back to the narrative and the disciples, who have heard Jesus' question addressed to them. "Who do you say that am?" Are we surprised to read that it is Peter who is the first to answer? Peter, the first to leave the boat to walk to Jesus, the first to sink in the waters. Yes, it is Peter who speaks out first, as loudly as he spoke out on those rough seas, "*Lord, save me!*". This day he declares: "*You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the Living God!*" Wow, Peter! Where did that come from? Well, Jesus tells us exactly where that confession came from – it

came from God. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God comes from that same God. Once again, God has had a hand in Peter’s life, in his journey of faith.

Now, we come to the point, when Jesus will make that connection with Peter’s name – “you are Petros” and Peter’s confession, “on this *petra*, I will build”. Peter’s divinely inspired acknowledgment of who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of **the Living God** – not of some dead emperor, not of some god represented by a stone statue; Peter’s confession is the rock on which the church will be built.

By the way, the word for ‘church’ – *ekklesia*’ only appears in Matthew’s Gospel and Jesus uses it here for the first time. In Greek, it literally means those “called out”. This suggests that the church is composed of people called out. People called out to confess Jesus is the Christ. People called out to live in this world in a different way, a kingdom way.

Jesus speaks of the rock on which he will build his church. Some have said, Jesus was signaling a special role for Peter (Petros). Others would say, that Jesus is speaking of the confession that is the ‘*petra*’, the rock, that will be the foundation for Christ’s Church. Jesus has already spoken of building on the rock – he concluded his Sermon on the Mount with this image: “*Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the wise man who built his house on rock.*” Jesus understands the importance of building on the rock - a firm foundation. That foundation rests on God’s Word, hearing God’s Word, living by God’s Word, confessing Jesus as God’s Word.

We jump ahead in the Gospel and we will see how shaky any foundation based on Peter can become. Later, in a garden, Peter will be asked three times to make a confession that connects him with Jesus. On that occasion, Peter fell short of a bold confession – 3 times he fell short: “*I do not know what you are talking about.*” “*I do not know the man.*” “*I do not know the man!*” Peter’s flesh and blood fears ruled that day, he was not able to provide much of a foundation for building a church.

Peter’s words condemned him. On that same evening, Jesus would be condemned by the religious authorities. They probed Jesus: “Tell us, if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” To which, Jesus said: “*You have said so.*” They were not pleased with Jesus’ answer and wanted no part of that confession. They sent him on to Pilate and, ultimately, the Cross. Jesus would pay the price for being the Messiah with his flesh and blood. Matthew tells us that as Jesus died on the Cross, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, its foundation shook, the rocks (the *petrai*) were split. Jesus was in the process of establishing a new foundation that would be grounded on his death on that Cross. Later, he would be buried – in a tomb hewn out of rock sealed with a great stone. But the words of Peter’s divinely inspired confession would prove true – Jesus was the Son of the Living God! Jesus emerged – no stone, no rock, not even death, could hold him. He was, indeed, God’s living Messiah - Christ alive for us!

Jesus’s hands and arms were again free to embrace all, with mercy and grace, love and forgiveness. Jesus would gather again his disciples. He would embrace them with his forgiving and teaching words. He would set them on the firm foundation established by his death and resurrection – his mercy and grace, love and forgiveness. This would allow them to build his church. The disciples had not yet seen the whole story back in Caesarea Philippi, but now they had. Now, that confession, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” was grounded in their flesh and blood experience of Jesus’ death and Jesus’ resurrection. Now Jesus would send them out to all the world to make other disciples, to teach and baptize in his name – Jesus Christ.

Jesus established the foundation, he sent those who acknowledged this to build the church and share the good news that there is a rock on which we can stand, a rock to which we can cling.

We understand that we need something – someone who will not be shaken by this world or this life. We have had, we have, we will have our shaky moments, our flesh and blood moments of fear and doubt, discouragement and despair. We will find that people and things that we have relied upon can become shaky – having a Peter moment. Jesus' firm promise of grace offers us a place to stand as God's children, forgiven and redeemed. Jesus' Cross, marked on our foreheads, is our reminder of our rock, who goes with us, challenging and guiding us to confess with our thoughts, words and deeds that Jesus is the One who will not be shaken, Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

Peter makes a wonderful confession today. I would also commend another confession found in our lessons today – from our Psalm: *“the Lord will fulfill his purpose for me – your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.”* This confession is very personal – the Psalmist testifies: God has a purpose “for me” and what’s more, God will fulfill that purpose. But the confession is also a public proclamation. The Psalmist shares a strong statement of trust in God for all to hear – “listen to me as I tell of this wonderful God who fulfills his purpose for each of us.” Then the Psalmist turns the personal confession about God to direct praise of God – *“Lord, your steadfast love endures forever. Yes, this God who works in us to fulfill his purposes, is the God of steadfast love, a love that endures forever. Yes, this is the Living God in whom I trust.”*

Our God, is, indeed, a living God, the source of enduring steadfast love. This gentle love is our firm rock on which we can build our lives as we confess with our thoughts, words and deeds what God has revealed to us: Jesus crucified and raised from the dead is our living Lord, forever! Amen.