

Matthew 16:13-20

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13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 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. 18 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. 19 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.” 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

THE ROCK?

There are only two places in the Gospels where the word church is mentioned, and today’s lesson is one of them. Jesus says, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church ...”

The church is built upon Peter. What does this mean?

The Roman Catholic Church has always maintained that this is the foundation of the papacy because Peter was the first bishop of Rome.

Protestants have said that the “you are the rock” refers not so much to Peter himself but rather to Peter’s confession of faith. Jesus is not building the church so much on Peter personally but upon Peter’s Spirit inspired confession that Jesus is the Son of God.

But, no matter how we interpret this passage, the thing that impresses me is that Jesus turns to Mr. Foot in Mouth himself, Peter and makes him the “rock” upon which he will build his church. Jesus chooses to build the church upon a very flawed and fallible human being.

Really Jesus? Peter? What were you thinking?

At this point in the story it's hard to believe that Peter could say or do anything that would further the kingdom of God.

For example, in the passage that follows our lesson for today Jesus once again talks about going to Jerusalem. There he will suffer, be crucified and on the third day rise from the dead.

This Messiah will die for the sins of the world. It is through this selfless act that the world will be able to see the truth about God's grace and forgiveness.

But, this is not what Peter wanted to hear. Peter took Jesus aside to rebuke him and said, "God forbid such a thing would happen."

And Jesus turns to Peter, the one who has just received the truth about God in Jesus, the one who was blessed, the one who had the keys to the kingdom ... and Jesus said,

"Get behind me Satan."

Just that quickly Peter goes from being the rock on which the church is built to being the messenger of the Devil, the source of temptation.

How could Jesus trust Peter to be the rock, the foundation on which the church is built? He seems like a terrible candidate for this job.

Peter is always saying the wrong thing. Peter is always doing the wrong thing. We know that when the chips are down Peter will even deny knowing Jesus.

If we were evaluating Peter as a candidate for the ministry we would probably suggest that he do something else with his life. His faith was just not strong enough. He was not a stable enough person to be entrusted with the care of a church.

And yet Jesus said that Peter was the rock on which the church would be built. Peter would be given the keys to the kingdom and even hell would not prevail against the church that is built on people like Peter.

REVELATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

This is a very important point. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But, that confession did not come because Peter was such a bright guy. Jesus told Peter that “flesh and blood” had not revealed this to him. His heavenly Father had revealed this to him.

The church is not built on flesh and blood, upon what we can do and learn. The church is built upon revelation, what God has chosen to reveal to us.

And by the power of the Spirit this is the one thing Peter got right. God was in Christ. In the life of Jesus we see as much of God as we could ever hope to see.

But, this is about more than doctrine. This is about more than just saying the right things about Jesus. This is about discipleship. This is about doing the right things in Jesus’ name.

Peter will form a church, a community of faith. And this church will be shaped and molded by the teachings of Jesus and the other mighty acts of God recorded in the Bible.

But, this will happen only after Peter and the other disciples are filled with the Spirit at Pentecost. This new community of faith will be founded upon the power of the Spirit and not open the ambitions of men and women.

When Jesus polled the disciples about public opinion, the disciples said that many people thought that he was John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets raised anew.

In a way the public was right. The ministry of Jesus was not a disruption in God’s work but a continuation of a long line of faithful servants that were willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of God’s people.

And the fact that this confession is made in Caesarea Philippi, the city that bears Caesar’s own name, is significant as well. When Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, the anointed one of God, it is a direct challenge to Roman authority.

I suspect the disciples probably got very excited when Jesus confirmed that he was the Messiah and started talking about giving his disciples the keys to the kingdom. It seemed like a long awaited political revolution was imminent.

(And it also explains Peter's disappointment when Jesus described his messianic role as that of a suffering servant. Messiahs didn't get themselves crucified. They led the victorious into battle. At least that's how Peter saw it. But, of course Peter was wrong.)

The church is founded upon people like Peter ... people who are fallible, fickle and often weak. In other words the church is founded upon people like you and me.

But, people like Peter will not define the message and the mission of that church. The message and the mission of the church will always be defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

That's why at the end of our lesson for today Jesus sternly warns his disciples, "Don't tell anyone that I'm the Messiah."

Jesus' vision of what it meant to be a Messiah was quite different from the disciple's vision, and so Jesus could not allow his disciples to use the word Messiah until their understanding was complete. They would have inadvertently proclaimed the wrong message about Jesus.

Proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God would have to wait until after the resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Spirit.

There's a big gap between just saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and actually becoming Jesus' disciple. There's a big gap between saying that in Jesus we have the keys to the kingdom, the message that will challenge Caesar and the powers that be and actually being willing to speak truth to power.

But, there are moments in time when the Spirit of God enables us to understand and get it right. And there are also times that, like Peter, we run away and deny our faith.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Jesus still asks, “Who do you say that I am?” For us life is a struggle to answer Jesus’ question not only with what we say but also with what we do.

What do we say about Jesus? Who is He? What difference does He make in our lives? This is a very personal question. This is a question that challenges us.

This is a question that should even frighten us. What do we say about Jesus by our actions? Or, as someone once put it: “If we were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?”

A nominal Christian was at a business conference in the old Soviet Union, and had a conversation with a government official. She said, “You are a Christian. I am an atheist. Tell me. What difference does your belief in God make in the way you vote and the way you spend your money?”

The businessman was stunned. He later said, “I realized that though I believed like a believer, I lived like an atheist.” This became a turning point in the man’s life and led him back to a vibrant Christian faith.

And today Jesus turns to us and asks the same question. “What about you? Who do you say that I am?” Jesus wants more than just right doctrine. Jesus wants changed lives.

What difference does it make in our lives when we say that Jesus is the Son of the living God? What sacrifices have we made? What crosses are we willing to take up in order to follow him?

Perhaps the best answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” is a life of faithful service. The life we live in light of our messianic hopes is just as important as what we say about Jesus.

If we really believe that Jesus is Lord, if we really believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, if we really believe that in the end God’s love and justice will prevail, how would that belief change our approach to life today?

When people believe that Jesus is Lord and live like it, a community based upon grace and forgiveness is formed. This is the basic building block of the church. The church is built on this rock.

THE GATES OF HELL

And the church needs this word, especially in times like ours. Did you notice the promise that goes along with the foundation of the church? Peter (and people like him) will be the rock that forms the foundation of the church and “*the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*”

That’s an important promise.

Some weeks it seems like the gates of hell are winning. This was one of those weeks.

From Missouri to the Middle East the news was all bad. All over the world people of faith were caught in the cross fire of evil and fear.

We cannot minimize the pain and suffering of the world in which we live. There are many reasons to be afraid of what might happen next. We know from Jesus’ story that sometimes the righteous ones are the ones who are crucified for their beliefs.

But, I also know that when Matthew wrote his gospel the church was facing similar challenges. The Romans had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

God’s people had been scattered all over the ancient world.

Christianity was considered to be just a small sect of this scattered Jewish faith. And this little church was persecuted by the state because of her confession that Jesus (and not Caesar) is Lord. Most of the Jews rejected her message as heretical.

The chances of survival seemed slim at best.

But, to a people hanging on by the fingernails the words of Jesus gave them hope. Like Peter you are the rock. The church is built on you, and the gates of hell will not prevail against you.

The gates of hell are built upon the twin pillars of fear and despair. If you can make people afraid and take away their hope, you can control them completely.

Out of fear and despair ordinary people can do extraordinarily bad things.

PETER AND FORGIVENESS

What can interrupt that cycle? It is forgiveness. The gates of hell are built on fear and despair. The church is built on the rock of forgiveness.

Think about it. Out of fear Peter denied knowing Jesus. But, that denial was not the end of the story.

The Bible tells us that after the resurrection Peter was given a chance to follow Jesus instead of his fears. In John's gospel the risen Christ asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" (Perhaps this was a way of forgiving the three times that Peter denied his Lord.)

And each time Peter was asked that question he would answer, "You know that I love you." And in reply Jesus gave Peter a command. "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-19) In other words the forgiveness of Peter was followed by a call to service in Jesus' name.

I think this act of forgiveness allowed Peter to be the rock that the church needed him to be. The forgiveness of Jesus loosed the bonds of guilt and fear in Peter's life.

And in turn Peter was able to loose the bonds of guilt and fear in the lives of others. It was forgiveness that allowed Peter to go where Jesus wanted him to go and do what Jesus wanted him to do.

And the same is true for us. If Jesus could forgive and use someone like Peter, then maybe Jesus could forgive and use someone like you or me.

And I think that's what Jesus is talking about when he said that Peter and the other disciples had the keys to the kingdom. They could lose the bonds of others because they knew what it meant to be forgiven. They could forgive the sins of others because God in Christ had forgiven their sins.

This was the rock upon which the church is built, forgiveness. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

I said that there are two places in the gospels where the word church is mentioned. One is our lesson for today, and the other is also in Matthew, Matthew 18:17.

This passage is about how forgiveness is essential in the church. Jesus said in effect that it’s not possible to be the church unless forgiveness is a part of our relationships. We can’t worship. We can’t receive God’s forgiveness unless we make things right with our brothers and our sisters.

We will always struggle with this. We will still succumb to fear and despair and guilt. We will nurse grudges and not forgive. Even after receiving forgiveness from the risen Christ, Peter was not an exemplary disciple. In fact his weaknesses and fears surfaced over and over again.

But, in the end the power of God’s forgiveness in Christ Jesus was enough to enable Peter to do the job that he had been given.

In the end he was the rock on which the church was founded, the rock of forgiveness. The bonds of guilt and despair were loosened in his life and in the lives of countless others who came to know the message of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS TODAY

And we are part of that community where forgiveness still plays a vital role.

A five-year-old boy was angry with a friend who didn’t sit with him on the bus. He went home and shared this hurt with his dad and his dad said, “If we don’t forgive, we will always be alone.”

The little boy learned the lesson. A few weeks later he was learning the story of Joseph at church, and they got to the part where Joseph reconciled with his brothers. The teacher asked why we forgive.

And this little five-year-old boy raised his hand and echoed what his father had taught him, “Because if we don’t forgive, we will always be alone.”

Do you feel alone? Do you feel disconnected from the ones you love?
Perhaps the way back home might begin with forgiveness.

The church becomes a community of faith; the church is tied together by the power of forgiveness. The church is founded on Peter, not because Peter was such a great model of discipleship but because Peter was an example of how a life can be changed by forgiveness.

In these past years there has been a lot of research on the power of forgiveness and especially the dangers of not forgiving.

There is empirical evidence that those who forgive live longer. Those who forgive have healthier hearts. Those who forgive heal more quickly.

But, beyond the physical benefits of forgiveness, we learn that the emotional benefits are even more profound. Our relationships are healthier. We form stronger friendships. We are better able to stay connected with the ones we love.

In a world filled with anger and fear, learning to forgive is the first step toward realizing the prophet's dream of beating swords into plowshares. Learning to forgive is the first step toward a lasting peace.

What do we say about Jesus?

He was the one who died for our sins on the cross. He forgives us.

And that frees us to live in a difficult world with hope. That brings us together and builds us up. Friends I have already said it, but I want to say it again. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Go and spread the good news.

Amen.