

You are Peter

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—24 August 2014

Matthew 13.16-20

Once upon a time I was a Roman Catholic and I thought that the Catholic Church really was the one true church. That belief was based on doctrine, teaching I had been given. The foundation of that teaching are these verse we heard today. When Simon Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, 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 shall not prevail against it.” This was the text that seemed to give authority to the successors of Peter, a claim made by the successive Bishops of Rome. It was claim that reached its zenith at Vatican 1 with the crafting of the doctrine of papal infallibility.

It is interesting to me now that my belief about the Roman Catholic Church was based on a doctrine, a teaching that I accepted as true, whereas faith, the type of faith that transforms lives, that provides hope, freedom, strength and power comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. It was when I got into a relationship with Jesus that I recognized the difference between doctrine and faith. Faith is a whole other journey. It is that journey that Peter takes and by doing so sets up a chain, a link, that is so much more than disputes about doctrine.

It all begins when Peter answers that most critical of questions, the only question that really matters, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said. Jesus asks, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ You see it doesn't matter what the church says about Jesus. It doesn't matter what theologians, preachers and ministers say. It doesn't matter what our parents have said, our friends, the radio, or any other commentator or academic. The only thing that matters is the answer we individually give from our heart to Jesus' question: “Who do you say that I am?” The answer you give to that question (and by the way it can shift and change over the years) will determine the nature of your faith, how it is played out in your actions and the whole quality of your life now and for eternity.

Peter becomes the first person to make what has been called the great Christian Confession of faith. He names Jesus as the Messiah, the hope of Israel, the son of the one who created heaven and earth. Before Peter sees this, the Gospels say that the demons knew who Jesus was and God knew who Jesus was. Now, Jesus is beginning to be known by people—and something new is happening, something new is being built—by the will of God, and by the power of God. The very first thing that happens is Simon is given a new name. And “Peter” really is a *new* name—there is absolutely no record of anyone using Petros, the Greek word that means “rock,” or “Cephas,” the same word in Aramaic, as a proper name before this event. In the Hebrew mind, names and naming were very important. A name was the summary of the existence of the thing named. To change a person's name—as God changed Abram's name to Abraham, and Jacob's name to Israel—was to alter fundamentally that person's identity, relationships, and mission. To give a person his or her name was, in some way, to shape their destiny.

It still works that way: to confess Jesus as the Christ is to be changed, it is to be given, by him, a new name; it is to be given identity and mission in relationship to Jesus. That was acted out visibly with Peter. It continues to be true among us.

Part of the identity we receive from the Lord, is the same as Peter's. He is Rock number 1, the first rock of the community, the church that Christ is building. We are, in this respect, like movie sequels. You are Rocky 5 billion, or whoever—same director, same plot, larger cast. We continue to be called to be who Peter was called to be. Through us, and by us, Christ continues to build his church. Through us, Christ continues to be present to his world. This church that the Lord began with Peter, and that we are a part of, is a holy and a sacred thing. It is not merely or mainly a voluntary association of like-minded people; it is not primarily or at its heart a human institution. It is instead a divine mystery, much greater than we can see or imagine, larger than any denominational boundaries and doctrinal disputes—it is stronger even than death itself, vast in space and time. As we look at the church it may not look like that is the case – I mean what a mess it is sometimes! But as someone said to me only recently, “Only the fact that Christ himself builds and sustains the church can account for it still being here—it is a complete miracle!”

The church is built of stones, or rocks; and these stones are laid one on top of the other. They touch, so the building is a single structure that continues through space and time. Recently as some of you know I have been building rock walls at our coast house - and Jacob has helped at times - in fact a lot. There are key principles in building a dry stone rock wall. The foundation rocks must be large enough to support what comes on top. Each rock must touch the one next to it. You must overlay one rock on two and two rocks on one. You have to fill the gaps with smaller rocks. To get a rock wall to stand the test of time you don't need perfect rocks - ones that are of uniform appearance and smooth. Any rock can fit in a wall. You just have to be patient, creative and work together. The rock wall David, Jacob and I built is not perfect. Actually it looks pretty rough but it is really strong and has a rugged special beauty - just like us really, all here together at St Philip's. Together the church, you and I, is this beautiful pile of rocks, the Body of Christ and we all bring our gifts to make it the wonder it is.

Perhaps you can see the continuity that is inherent in the church? It is a continuity of Christ's presence, a continuity of faith, a continuity of tradition and doctrine, and a continuity of persons—each connected to those who went before. And that continuity is important. We call it “Apostolicity.” It is one of the four marks of the church—in the Nicene Creed we say that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Apostolic Succession of our bishops—that is the fact that our bishops are part of a virtually unbroken line beginning with Peter and the others—is one important part of this Apostolicity—it is one important way we are connected to the Apostles and the early church. Those first rocks of the church whose faith relationship with Jesus were so important in building the church. Apostolicity also means that the rocks are laid one on top of the other. Each new name, each new rock, builds on something unbroken and continuous. Peter's declaration about Jesus is the first rock of faith in the church. When we join ourselves to Christ we become a rock in the same story and integral important part in keeping Jesus amazing witness of God's love, compassion and reconciliation alive in the world.

There is a wonderful image for this. Think of the last 2,000 years as rings of time, as concentric circles of time, scores and scores of such circles. We are in the very outermost circle, farthest away from the center—and at the center is a Cross. We are brought into the circle, into the faith, in large part because somewhere, somehow, someone in the circle just before ours took us by the hand and said, “come,” and so drew us in. That is one very important reason why we are here. That person was able to do this for us because someone had taken him or her by the hand and had drawn that person in. And so on, through all the centuries, hands are held through all of those circles. Until we reach the place where a very few of those hands were held by hands touched by

the mark of nails. So we hold hands touched by nails.

In this way, Christ builds his church. No one can create another church. Christ's church can be built on no other foundation, with no other living stones than those he names, and with no other cornerstone and chief builder than Christ himself. We constantly re-live this Gospel story. As we say to Jesus, "you are the Christ," he says to us—to each of us—"you are Peter, you too, are a rock, and with you, also, I am building my church." What happened to Peter continues and it includes us.

One more thing: Jesus called Peter blessed, fortunate, happy. Remember what that blessedness looked like. Remember Peter's life of poverty and struggle, of pain and of conflict and, finally, of a martyr's death. That's part of what Jesus meant by blessed. To be given a new name by Jesus, to have a Christian name, this always includes being named as servant, as minister, as one who gives one's self, and so becomes a gift to the world in the name of Christ. To be chosen, to be called, to be named as of this community of Christ followers is never done as a sign of privilege, but always as a mark for service: never for ourselves alone, but always for others. Always for love, for peace, for justice. Let me pray again today's prayer...

O God, fount of all wisdom,
in the humble witness of the apostle Peter
you have shown the foundation of our faith:
give us the light of your Spirit,
that, recognising in Jesus of Nazareth the Son of the living God,
we may be living stones for the building up of your holy Church;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.