

Peter the Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “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 will not prevail against it. 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”

Quoting a friend in my sermon a couple of weeks ago, I referred to Peter as “Rocky.” *Petra* means “rock,” of course, and so the reference in today’s Gospel is a play on words. Peter is the rock upon which Jesus will build his church.

More on that later, but first I want to suggest a couple of things about today’s Gospel reading. Jesus is conversing with his disciples. I imagine they were having a quiet moment together in the course of their busy schedule. Sitting under a tree, perhaps, eating a lunch of deli sandwiches. And Jesus poses the question, the unspoken question that lay at the heart of all of their travels and activity: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

I imagine the disciples shifting a bit uncomfortably, not wanting to answer the question, at least not publicly. There might be Pharisees lurking nearby for all they knew, and they might overhear the conversation and cause trouble. Lord knows those Pharisees could raise a stink, and no one understood that better than Jesus and his disciples.

So they hedged. Matthew doesn't tell us who responded, but the answer given was safe and unlikely to cause offense: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

But Jesus presses the issue: "But who do you say that I am?" Once again, I imagine the disciples stealing glances at one another and then over their shoulders. Finally, Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

And notice the response. So many times, earlier in Jesus' ministry, the disciples just didn't get it. They didn't quite grasp what was going on. How many times did Jesus admonish them by saying, "O ye of little faith"? Or, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me"?¹

Not this time. When Jesus hears Peter's response, he immediately affirms Peter himself. Peter, the Rock, who is speaking for all of the disciples, gets it. And then Jesus adds the charge, "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. 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."

The Roman Catholic Church uses this verse to support the claim that theirs is the true church. The Vatican flag uses the symbol of crossed keys to illustrate its "power of the keys." In Roman Catholic theology, the pope, who is the apostolic successor to St. Peter, the first bishop of Rome,

¹ John 14:9 (ASV).

holds the sole power for determining who is or is not saved, who will or will not go to heaven.

I mean no disrespect to our Roman Catholic friends, but I think this interpretation of the story misses the point. Peter, as we know, was anything but solid; he was hardly a rock in that sense. Remember when he sought to walk on the Sea of Galilee? He vaulted over the gunwale of the boat, took a few steps – and then sank beneath the waves, like a rock.

And all of those protestations about fidelity to Jesus. I'll never deny you, Peter protests. Never. But Jesus knew better. Peter the Rock was, at best, a work in progress, more spineless than solid. And sure enough. When Jesus was haled before the authorities for a sham trial, a couple of young women saw Peter cowering in a corner and allowed as though he looked familiar. Wasn't he one of the people they saw with Jesus, the man on trial?

Peter denied it. No not me, he protested. You must be mistaken. And he added an oath for good measure. Not once, but three times.

No, Peter – Rocky – was anything but solid. So Jesus must surely have had his tongue at least partially in cheek when he declared that Peter was the Rock on which he would build his church. Peter was anything but solid.

But therein lies the beauty of the passage, I think. Jesus was willing to entrust his entire earthly legacy to a flawed individual like Peter, and, by extension, to flawed human beings like you and me. The Roman Catholic Church misreads this passage, in my humble opinion, when it claims sole and singular authority for itself by invoking the power of the keys. That's not the point. We are all flawed and stumbling and lacking in courage – like Peter – but Jesus is willing to meet us in our humanity, our weakness.

The reward for stepping out in faith is not that it garners some kind of authority. Those of us who follow Jesus are not called to render decisions about who should or should not enter the kingdom of heaven. No, Jesus

reaches out to us in our weakness and our infirmity and our lack of resolve, just like he did with Peter.

All of us face moments of doubt and weakness, times when our faith wavers, when we feel desolate and alone, like Peter sinking beneath the waves on the Sea of Galilee. And in those moments of terror and desolation, I invite you to consider Peter the Rock, who wasn't much of a rock after all. And yet Jesus affirmed him, even in all of his flawed humanity, just as he affirms you and me in our humanity.

This is the vision of the church, the followers of Jesus, that emerges from today's Gospel. Not one of triumphalism and solidity, a fortress against all adversity. But one of humanity and brokenness. It is there that we meet Jesus, the Man of Sorrows.

And somehow, through the miracle of grace, we are made whole.

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Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut