

“On this Rock”

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 23, 2020
Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman

“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.” (Matthew 16:13-20)

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The idea of building a house for God is an ancient theme in the Bible. David, shepherd boy become King of Israel wants to do it. But God tells David, “No!” Do not build me a house. Instead, I will build of you my house. That is Old Testament stuff. Of course, David’s son, Solomon, does build a house for God, the great shining First Temple built of stone in the center of Jerusalem. The one destroyed by the Babylonians before they took the people of God from Jerusalem into exile to Babylonia. This first Temple would be rebuilt, stone upon stone, when the people would be allowed to go back home again. But the rebuilt Temple, known as Second Temple, would be destroyed again, leveled to rubble by the Romans several centuries later, only one wall left. The ruins of one wall only still remains today two thousand years later, the wall known as the wailing wall. This wailing wall is a huge tourist attraction in Jerusalem. People, both Jews and Christians, from all over the world visit the wailing wall, touch its stones, tuck little rolled up paper prayer requests into the cracks and crevices between its stones.

Jesus would know this Second Temple. He would walk around it, in it, through it. He would, in a memorable scene, drive the merchants selling sacrificial animals and the money lenders from its outer courtyard. He would vow its destruction, this building built by human labor to house the Holy. Jesus used building images many times. Perhaps, as a carpenter he knew the basics of building well. One of the main things a carpenter did in the first century was help build houses, often combining skills at both stone masonry and woodworking. Jesus would use images of keystones and foundations and the idea of “stone upon stone” as material for his teachings, as he was forming and mentoring disciples, his followers. Jesus was, from the beginning of his ministry till the end of his earthly life, building something. Something for God. As he hangs dying on a cross and darkness spreads over the land, the earth quakes, rocks split, and there is a sense that old foundations are shaking, shifting, splitting. A metaphor for the dissembling of the old to make way for the new. Old structures passing away, renovation in progress to open up spaces, not confine them. Jesus’ death as with his life was part of his mission of building. In our

Gospel passage, Jesus, as builder, is focused on what is foundational. Where do we find ourselves today in this teaching?

The essential question that the Gospels pose and then attempt to answer is, “Who is this man, Jesus and what is he trying to do?” In a memorable passage that has critical relevance for us today, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks two questions. First, “Who do people say I am?” Then he zeroes in with the more pointed, intimate question, “Who do you say that I am?” The questions are directed to all the disciples. Simon (who becomes known as Peter), often the first to speak up, blurts out immediately, as if without thinking, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God?” Jesus pivots and focuses on him, declaring, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.”

What’s in a nickname? Peter the Rock. Let’s take a closer look at what Jesus is saying here. Jesus spoke in Aramaic, using the Aramaic word *kephas*. The Gospels were written in Greek. Here the Aramaic *kephas* was translated into the Greek *petros/petra*. In our passage today in its original Greek Jesus uses the word *petros* for both Simon (Simon, the rock) and the rock on which the “church” will be built. An interesting twist here is that the original Aramaic word and its Greek translation can be interpreted as either a moveable stone or an immovable rock. Is there intention or ambiguity here as we focus on what Jesus is referring to as he addresses Simon, calling him *kephas/petra*, while also using that term as foundation for what is being built? Hold that thought as we turn to another important word in this passage, “church.”

What is Jesus building? The other interesting word in this passage is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* as “church.” It is a Greek word further explored in other Gospels and especially in the Book of Acts. Today in our lifetime and the life of the “Church” we seem to interpret the word church as a structure. Either the brick and mortar, board and batten, wood and glass places where we gather to worship – the idea of church as a “house” in which we seek and find God waiting for us. How important our buildings are – our houses of God. Think of the childhood rhyme, complete with hand motions you may have learned in Sunday school: “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and there are the people.” Or, the other way we interpret “The Church” is as the organizational structure that frames how we move together, as we operate and co-operate together as a body of the faithful.

The Greek word *ekklesia* as used in the New Testament is really synonymous with the idea of “community” and theologically as “body.” *Ekklesia* is about the communal “body” of the faithful. The gospels and the Book of Acts of the Apostles use the word when referring to the “community” of the faithful, a community emerging out of and built upon the work of the Apostles and followers of the Way of Jesus. The Apostle Paul fleshes out this concept in his Epistle writings. We see this today in our passage from his Letter to the Romans where he is talking about the “one body” in which there are “many members.” Our childhood rhyme has perpetuated a skewed interpretation of “church.” “Church” is really the whole body, all the people, whose gathering and work is not confined to a building, with or without steeple. A building simply cannot confine the “body” of Christ faithful.

When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” and Simon Peter jumps in, we do not know what the others would have said, how they would have responded. We are left to ponder this. Simon Peter, who immediately responds, is a flawed, multi-dimensional character in the Gospel stories. The first words out of his mouth are often way off base. He is a character Jesus often uses as a foil for his teachings. But here Simon Peter is startlingly on target. I have this strange sense that what Simon Peter said surprised even himself. A truth that burst out from the deepest center of his being – an “aha” moment for him originating from the wisdom place of his heart. Perhaps even surprising Jesus that God was using Simon to give voice to this truth.

Absolute truth as to who Jesus was and is. Simon Peter speaks the truth, “You are the Messiah, Son of the living God!” Messiah, the one promised by God for God’s people. The One who was promised to come and deliver God’s people from whatever bondage, in whatever exile, they found themselves. The One who would loose God’s people into more abundant life. God is the “living God” in this truth spoken by Simon Peter. Not some dead mythical authority to which the people give allegiance and see as authority over their lives. But a living God – one alive and active. A Divine flowing, moving energy and identity present in the life and at the core of every being. Jesus as “Son” of this living God, is a human vessel, divine DNA enfleshed in human form. And then this “Messiah, Son of the living God” speaks and calls the disciple standing before him, *petros*, a rock, a stone – building material for the “body” of the church.

So where does that leave us today as we imagine Christ standing in front of us asking, “Who do YOU say I am?” I imagine Christ’s eyes piercing deep into each of us, seeing the essential core of us, divinely created. Each of us with the potential to be building blocks, members of the body of Christ available for God’s plan of re-creation, re-novation, re-newal, re-framing of a world that has wandered off center. Whether we are moveable stones, or immovable rock we are useful to God. The foundation of what Christ was, is and always will be trying to build here on earth is centered and grounded upon faithfulness, faith in the truth of who we were created to be in God’s divine design for God’s world.

Somewhere in the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, Christ points to the stones around him and says, “Even these stones will speak!” We are stones of flesh. Will we allow ourselves to be available to form the house of God? Stones, by their very presence witnessing to the truth of a living God whose design is based on love and abundance and who needs us to co-operate and be part of that design. We can be such stones. Will we: will our lives speak the truth of Christ, the truth of love, the truth of a living God?

By God’s amazing grace, may we become alive to this amazing truth of who we are. . . .

Torrence