

Matthew 16:13-20 August 27, 2017 both services as pastor is on vacation

The Gospel story opens with a dialog between Jesus and his disciples as they are passing through the countryside on the way toward Jerusalem. Before he confronts the authorities and risks arrest and execution, it seems important to Jesus to know whether his teaching has been heard, do people realize what he has done and do they recognize him for who he is? So Jesus asks the disciples. "Who do people say that the Son of man is? After they respond, Jesus asks "But who do you say that I am?" In other words, do they agree with the crowds that Jesus is a prophet of the end time or a herald of the of the coming Messiah or do they even see the truth about him, as unexpected as it is?

Peter answers with all the impetuosity for which he is known. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". I wonder how Peter said that line. Was it a joyous declaration? YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD. Or was it a dawning recognition or a stunned realization YOU are the Christ, the son of the Living God. Whatever it was, one thing is certain: the knowing happened in that moment. The Gospels are written in the present-the verb tense holds us in the now. These words ground us in the exact moment of confession and revelation. And Jesus responds with his blessing: Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! I tell you, you are Peter, petros, rock and on this rock I will build my church.

Peter petros, rock, even after years I pictured that rock as a foundation stone: a massive piece of solid granite or marble. I pictured it as a rock in the parable on which the house was built, a rock as opposed to shifting sand. I saw it as the rock of the Temple Mount, or the Rock of Gibraltar, a footing on which the entire realm of God could stand. Then I began to wonder about that mental image. In Exodus 17 Moses struck the stone at Horeb and water poured from it. In Numbers 20 Moses again struck the rock and water poured out of it for the congregation and cattle. These Hebrew scriptures brings us to the rocks at Massah and Meribak- those hollow rocks with a stream of living water at its heart. These rocks, quite contrary to our western languages and our modern metaphysics, is not inanimate, not dead, not fixed and certain, immutable or unchanging. These

rocks alter in an instant: it lives and releases life to those who are hovering on the threshold of death.

What if the petros that Jesus was visualizing when he blessed Peter was not a solid, stable, foundation stone, but a rock like the rock at Horeb that poured God's redeeming sustaining presence into the midst of the people? The more I ponder this, the more appropriate it seems. The Peter Jesus knew in the course of his ministry was, after all, the world's most dependable and stable individual. Not!

Peter was passionate, hasty, impulsive, reckless, and unpredictable. Or course, someone less patient than Jesus might have been tempted to call him a blockhead from time to time, that that is another thing entirely.

If the rock at Horeb is closer to what Jesus was thinking when he spoke, it seems that there was something in Peter's spontaneous confession that convinced Jesus that his message has been heard, Some transformation has happened that is powerful and deep enough that it can be trusted to guide the assembly forward in faithful teaching and witness.

Suddenly, this lesson becomes more than a statement about the original disciples; it becomes an expectation of how each individual soul is to respond to his or her personal recognition of Jesus. Peter was the only first in a long line-not the line of popes as the Roman Catholic church teaches or even the line of ordained clergy-but of faithful men and women of all times and places who, in moments of revelation, have seen Jesus with the eyes of faith. In the moment of epiphany, Peter claims Jesus as his Messiah and frees Jesus for his death. All it needed was one person to understand.

Whenever human being strive to live in the image of God, there are strong rocks on which Jesus can build the church. The word Jesus would have used in Aramaic was the word for the congregation of Israel-not a building or an institution, but an assembly. Unfortunately, too often the church becomes a bureaucracy; insisting upon a set of forms and rituals that is more than durable, more than preserving :it is unyielding. Rare indeed is the denomination or congregation that dares to believe that it is a rock that exists only to be changed, to be broken open as at

Horeb and Meribah in a moment of need to reveal the living presence of the living God.

It seems to me that our task is to reclaim the complexity of biblical metaphors. To build his church-the assembly of faithful disciples-Jesus did not need dead building stones, but living rocks. He does not need our rituals and bureaucracies, but our hearts and spirit. The rituals and the institution can help us stay ready on the path, but in and of themselves they are meaningless. Commitment to the institution of the church should never supersede commitment to become living temples for God: bodies, minds, hearts and souls.

Jesus asked the disciples what they thought and believed and knew. Our faith is never found in the experiences of others; it is found in a personal relationship with our God. It is found in the awakening moment of realization and recognition and in the joyful confession of what is revealed to us then. It is not only Peter to whom Jesus spoke, because the church cannot be built of dead rock or the faith of past generations. So the question to each one of us is the same question: Who do you say Jesus is? Now that is a profound question. Who do you say Jesus is? We answer in words and deeds with lives changed, redirected and transformed.

Surely it is Jesus' eternal hope that to each of us he will be able to say: Blessed are you! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you but God who is in heaven. I tell you, you are petros and on this rock I will build my church. You are ALL petros and upon you ALL He will build his church. Amen and Amen