

Matthew 16:13-20

“Living What We Believe”

Ministers have a schedule for preaching that is offered to us each week call the Common Lectionary. It suggests an Old Testament passage, a Psalm, a New Testament passage and an Epistle for every Sunday of the year. Many ministers preach from the lectionary every week. It is supposed to be good discipline and keep you from always choosing your favorite book of the Bible. Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Methodists, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics have the same lectionary so if you are worshiping online and “attend” several different services in a given week, you may hear different sermons on the same passage.

In general, I do not use Lectionary. I tend to choose what the Holy Spirit leads me to – or at least that is my claim. I feel this helps me meet the people where they are and offer passages that might be particularly relevant to what the world is dealing with. Truth be told, I often just preach what I myself need to hear.

Over the summer, I felt led to preach from the miracles in the Bible. At a time when the whole world has been struggling, the Spirit impressed on me that hearing about God’s miracles could give us some hope and strengthen our faith when we really needed it. I sat down in late May and made a preaching plan, ending last Sunday with the greatest miracle of all time – the Resurrection of Jesus Christ!

So, when I had to choose the passage for today, I checked the lectionary to see what it offered, and the Holy Spirit did it again! Gave us the perfect passage to follow up those miracles with. See if you agree.

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling throughout Galilee. The disciples had seen him feed the five thousand, call Peter to walk on water to him and decide to heal a Canaanite woman's daughter. They had witnessed many healings and heard many teachings. Now they had arrived in Caesarea Philippi. This was a city known for being the center of worship to the Greek god, Pan. It is also the place where a cave to the underworld could be found, said to be where the gods of fertility slept during the winter and then came out for springtime. Because detestable acts occurred there, the entrance to the cave was known as "The Gates of Hell."

As modern-day Christians, we have to assume that Jesus was trying to teach a double lesson. He had reached the point in his ministry where people were starting to whisper about his identity. Was this John the Baptist? Elijah or Jeremiah come back to life? After witnessing so much of his work in the world, perhaps he just wanted to shed light on what his closest followers had come to believe. So that was the first lesson. A clarification of his identity from those who were with him daily.

I also think that perhaps it was intentional that, in a place where they were surrounded so blatantly by so many other gods, Jesus wanted to see how strong their faith was. In the face of such evil, what did the disciples really believe? So, he asked them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They repeated what they had heard.

This is not enough for Jesus, however. He presents his questions a little closer to home. "But who do YOU say that I am?" This is a perfect question for us today. After hearing the miracles from throughout the whole Bible, it is my hope that each of us listening will say that Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made by God, sent to teach us, heal us and perform miracles out of God's compassion. But also to reassure us of God's presence. OUR answer is that Jesus is OUR Risen Savior.

But perhaps that is not enough either. Because even though we say we believe in the miracles and *think* we **DO** believe in our hearts, how many of us still question God's intentions when we see the children playing alone on the playground because of COVID 19. How many of us wonder if God is paying attention to the divisions that seem to increase daily as we get closer to a national election. How many of us wish the God of miracles would put out fires in the Western states, stop the violence in Oregon, head hurricanes off at the pass or make it possible for college football to be normal this season? In other words, not only who do YOU say that Jesus is BUT how are you living your belief. How do we show others we have faith?

Well, let's go back to what happened that day as the disciples stood at the Gates of Hell. It is no surprise that we could count on Peter to immediately have an answer. Peter is always the first one out of the gate, the first to drop his fishing net, the first kid to wave his hand in class because he knows the answer. Yes, I can walk on water! Yes, I will follow you to the end! So of course, he answers for them all immediately by saying, "Well you are the Messiah! The Son of God!" Go Peter – you get an A!

In fact, at a time when there was no Apostles' Creed, no Nicene Creed or no Book of Confessions, Peter's answer is considered by scholars to be the first statement of faith found in the Bible. The first CREED if you will. I believe that Jesus is the Savior, the only Son of God.

The answer is so good it seems that Jesus rewards Peter right away. Now, he does point out that Peter only has such strong faith because it comes from God. Indeed, the same is true for all of us. As Reformed Christians we believe that God's gifts, even the gift of faith, are pure grace – unearned – undeserved, yet given. So even though Jesus does turn his praise into a little bit of a left-handed compliment, he surely rewards him.

“Peter,” Jesus declares, “you are no longer Simon bar Jonah but Petros, the Rock. The church will be built upon you and I will be sure you have the keys to the building, as we stand at the Gates of Hell, so that even death will not overcome my church.”

Now, let’s put ourselves in the other disciples’ sandals for a minute and imagine how they felt. They may have been wondering why Peter was singled out. What’s Peter got that I haven’t got? He’s very impulsive and was always speaks before he thinks. And even though he HAS walked on water, he also sank! Yes, he got the right answer, (brown noser!) but even Jesus said it was only because God gave it to him. Hmmpf!

On top of that, only six verses later, Peter would rebuke Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of Man. You see when Jesus explained that he was going to die soon, Peter blew a gasket and forbid God to let that happen! This resulted in Jesus calling him Satan! So, which one is he – saint or Satan? Rock or stumbling block?

Well friends, Peter is every one of us! Which is why we love him so much. Yes, Peter is impulsive, but some might say his faith is enthusiastic! Yes, Peter’s water-walking was not completely successful but at least he tried – he did after all, get out of the boat! Yes, he jumped down Jesus throat, but he probably said what the others were thinking, and his reaction was simply out of fear.

And as for the other disciples, because they had an advantage over us, they probably did not resent Peter at all. You see, they understood the nuances in the Greek, which you and I cannot, unless someone points it out to us. Jesus called Simon, his Hebrew name, Petros in Greek. And that word is translated as “rock.” That is why Peter has been called The Rock for centuries. But it was actually a specific rock. The word that Jesus used literally means “stone” or “pebble.” It is a small piece of a large rock.

Now why would Jesus do that? Because in the same sentence, he uses the word *petra*, the feminine form of the word, which means boulder, when he talks about the church. So, what Jesus told him was that he was going to be pebble, a small part, of the boulder which forms the church. And the church is God, the Rock of Ages, if you will. To put the phrase in modern day vernacular, Jesus called him a chip off the old block. That is why Jesus made sure that everyone knew that Peter was not being rewarded for his faith. His faith is a gift from God. Instead, he is being called to live that faith out. And so are we!

Friends, you and I – each of us here, every person listening now is being asked – WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? Now that you have heard my miracles, and believe them, by the faith that God has given you, WHAT are you being called to do with your faith? How will you be living what you believe?

Jesus gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and proclaimed him the leader of the church when Jesus was no longer with them because he knew that Peter would try. Peter would jump into the middle of things, share his faith without hesitation, find ways to perpetuate the truth that he believed at all costs. And that is what Jesus needed then.

It is also what Jesus needs now. The church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ on earth, is made up of the pebbles, the stones, that is you and I, that fit onto the boulder. The faith and other gifts that God has given us are what will keep the church strong and help it flourish in the face of the doubts and pain and grief that the world is dealing with.

In fact, I will even say that Peter's impetuosity was his gift. And what better time, now that we have been fed by the miracles found in Scripture, for each of us to clarify what our gift is. To hone them out, mine our gifts out of the soil, the rocks, the barren land or whatever ground you feel you are living on right now.

Some of us have gifts that are obvious. Some of us glorify God with the violin or by taking over the videography of worship so those who do not feel safe to join us can still participate on Sunday mornings. Some of us have the gifts of caring and make calls and send cards that no one knows about except those who are the recipients of the gifts. Some of us have the gift of holding the youth group together as we move forward to find our new normal.

But some of us may be those other disciples. Is it possible that when Jesus asked, “Who do YOU say that I am?” Peter blurted out the answer because the other disciples started tying their sandals or seeing if they had any figs in their pockets? That is not a criticism. Some of us need more time, more urging from the Holy Spirit to find our gifts. I mean, as much as I **am** like Peter, it did take me 18 years to answer the call of God and go to Seminary. Who am I to find fault with those other guys?

Friends, just as Jesus performed the miracles at exactly the right time to show compassion or to teach someone a particular lesson or to strengthen someone’s faith when they really needed it, so you and I will be shown how to live out our beliefs. If we believe. And when we seek God’s answer.

So, although Peter and the rest of the disciples were martyred for their faith, each of them became a stone, a pebble, on top of the boulder from which God formed the church. To be more Trinitarian, we might say that the church is made up of stones, placed upon God, the Rock of Ages; hewn, instructed and polished by the grace of Jesus Christ; held together by the Holy Spirit. And every rock is just as important as the next. Today, our faith is built upon the stones and pebbles that went before us, in this particular church and the church at large, just as we are building a place for the next generation to place their stones and pebbles.

In her sermon on this passage, minister Barbara Brown Taylor sums up this story in a perfect way, so I will borrow her words from her book, The Seeds of Heaven. “If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, there may be hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God’s chosen rock whether he is acting like a rock or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness – that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time and fall.”

To this I say, “Preach it sister!” And I also say, “Let’s all live it. Let’s live what we believe. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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