

Sermon for Proper 16A
Sunday, August 27, 2017
“*Ecclesia* = Community”

Texts: Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8; Collect for Proper 16

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Who do people say the Son of Man is? Who do you say that I am?” These were two questions that Jesus asked his disciples and directly to Peter. These are the two questions that frame the message of today’s Gospel lesson—that the Church is built on a rock, and that rock is Jesus Christ. So, what does it mean to be the Church? Let’s take a look at the questions that Jesus asked his disciples.

The first question was, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They responded by saying that some say John the Baptist. John the Baptist had been beheaded on the orders of the Judean King, Herod Antipas. Two chapters earlier, Herod wondered if Jesus might be John resurrected. John was a powerful man and many thought perhaps John had returned as Jesus. Some said Jesus was Elijah, the great worker of miracles from the Hebrew Scriptures. Some said Jesus was a prophet, Jeremiah, perhaps who spoke out against the religious leaders of Jerusalem and predicted the destruction of the Temple. Still others thought Jesus might be some other great prophet. In referring to himself as the Son of Man, Jesus was identifying himself in a way that echoed the writing of the prophet Daniel who said that God would give the Son of Man “dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.” Indeed, Jesus embodied all of those and more. Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one, Son of the living God.

That is exactly how Peter answered Jesus’s second question to the disciples: “Who do you say that I am.” In that moment, Peter recognized Jesus for who he really was. “You are the Messiah, Son of the living God.” Messiah and Christ both mean ‘anointed one’ in Hebrew and Greek, respectively. Only three kinds of people were anointed: prophets, priests, and kings. They were anointed with oil in order to set them apart for a special purpose ordained by God. Jesus was set apart at his baptism, when God said, “This is my son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

Prophets are meant to be listened to, because they call men and women to be something greater, to live a life in closer relationship with God. The Jews were expecting a messiah to save them from Roman rule and reestablish the great kingdom of Israel to its former glory that they had enjoyed under King David. Jesus was in the line of David, so there was an expectation that he would save the people of Israel. Jesus was all of those things, and Peter identified him as such. But, Jesus was the fulfilment of the great prophets who called people to something greater in order to draw them closer to God and foreshadowed the coming of the kingdom of God through his own death and resurrection.

Then Jesus gave Peter a charge to something unique. “You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” First of all, you need to hear the play on words that Jesus does here. This play on words isn’t obvious in English, but in Aramaic, in Greek, and even in Latin you can hear the play on words:

Σὺ εἶ Πέτρος καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν. (Greek)
Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram ædificabo ecclesiam meam. (Latin)

Peter’s given name was Simon Son of Jonah (Shimon bar Jonah), but Jesus called him by another name, Peter, which means rock. (This is mentioned in John 1:42, when Andrew recruits his brother Simon to one of Jesus’ disciples, and Jesus gives him the Aramaic name *Kephas*, which is translated ‘*Petros*’ in Greek.) Renaming isn’t unusual in the Bible. God often renamed people when they were called to a bigger task—Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, Jacob became Israel, Saul became Paul. Shimon became Kepha in Aramaic, Peter in Greek. For a modern context in English, imagine if they made a movie of today’s gospel story, and they cast Dwayne Johnson, aka The Rock, as Peter. Dwayne Johnson is the muscular pro-wrestler-turned-actor who starred in the films *Hercules*, *The Scorpion King*, and *The Mummy Returns*, and in the current HBO series, *Ballers*. In the new movie Jesus would say, “Dwayne Johnson, you are The Rock, and on this rock I will build my church.” Maybe now it makes more sense. (Funny how they have the same last name, too!) The rock that Jesus was speaking about wasn’t a boulder of stone or a place; the rock was Peter himself. Jesus was calling Peter into something new, bigger, and greater; Now this declaration by Jesus has been used by the historic institutional church to justify the authority of

the Church centered in Rome, where years later Peter would end up and begin the line of apostolic succession for the Roman or Western branch of the Christian Church and its daughter catholic churches who have retained the line of apostolic succession, including our own. But in calling Peter to be the rock of the church, it was Peter's testimony, that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, that Jesus was calling to be the foundation of the Church.

What is the Church? Although English gets its word from a different source, in the original word in the Greek text is *ekklesia*, which literally means 'called out.' It referred to the assembly of people gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. The church is not a building, it is not a place, nor is it an individual person; the church is each and every one of us here. We are the Church, we are the people who have been called out to proclaim the same message that Peter proclaimed, "You are Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One, Son of the living God." Look around you. You see the stones, you see the stained glass, you see the wood carvings, you hear the music, you sing the hymns, you're listening to the priest right now. None of those things is the church that Jesus is talking about. The church exists when the community, the *ekklesia*, gathers together. We are one body, but we have many members, as Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." We are all one, whether we are doing different ministries in the church or whether we embrace one the many ways we proclaim Jesus Christ through the various Christian traditions. As the church together we can be the foundation that will not let the gates of hell prevail against it.

When Jesus told Peter that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, he didn't say that the gates of hell wouldn't occasionally be open. Hell's gates are constantly opening and closing, aren't they? Hell's gate is open worldwide where countless people are being brutally attacked and martyred because of their faith. Hell's gate was open in Charlottesville, Virginia where hatred, bigotry, intolerance, and violence were championed, supposedly in the name of Christ. Hell's gate might be open in your own life with worries about money, strained relationships, health, addiction, and many other things. But, Jesus's words to Peter

give us hope that none of that will last. Hell may win the battle, but Christ always wins the war.

So if the Church is not about the buildings and pretty things or the institution, then why are they there? Well, it's because we humans are fickle; we have a sort of spiritual ADD, or something. Just about anything can distract us from our relationship with God: the game on TV, going to the beach on a beautiful sunny Sunday, sleeping in after spending our entire Saturday at some big church event, the problems in our lives, the problems in the world—lots of things can take our minds off God. If you don't believe it, just read a few verses after today's Gospel lesson; right after Peter is renamed to be the rock on which to build the church, he doubts Jesus's foreshadowing of his death, and Jesus calls him Satan and a stumbling block. Peter had a short attention span, he got it wrong all the time, but God still gave him the tools to be the first patriarch (the head or pope) of the Church at Rome. The church keeps us focused. These buildings remind us of God's beauty; these stained glass windows remind us of the story of Jesus the Christ. The liturgy reminds us that despite our shortcomings, God still loves us and he is unconditionally merciful in meeting us here by his real Presence in the Eucharist. The community gathered, the *ekklesia*, is how we hold it together when hell's portals fling wide open in our lives.

And, how is community to be lived out in our day-to-day lives? Again I call your attention to the words Paul, "For as in one body we have many members. Two things will be happening in our lives here at All Saints as the community gathered that I pray will bring us together in unity among ourselves and foster community in the context of the larger Church. Later today [After mass today] I will be meeting with all the heads of our ministries. The purpose of this meeting will be to discuss ways of grow all of our wonderful ministries. Each one is an extension of the Body of Christ in you, the members and the variety of things you do. I'd like everyone to pick up your bulletin for today and flip it over to the back cover. Toward the bottom of the page, you will see written in italics the Mission Statement of All Saints Church. I want us all to read it together now:

The mission of All Saints Church is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord by our participation in the Eucharist, our fellowship in oneness and diversity, by respect for each other, and through outreach into the community.

As a step toward increased unity among us, I am asking that every meeting of every ministry begin with prayer and recitation of our mission statement as the first order of business. I'm asking all ministries to spend time discussing how each element of our mission statement relates to the work that you do and how it will influence your plans for the future.

The second thing that is happening in the life of our parish community relates to our relationship in the context of the larger Church. You may remember a few months back I informed you of an opportunity to engage in a ministry partnership with our sisters and brothers of All Saints Lutheran Church here in Woodhaven. Since that time, there have been conversations with our Vestry and Wardens, with Bishop Provenzano, and with the bishop and leaders of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America about how such a partnership might be realized, to the benefit of each of our ministries and to the Woodhaven community and beyond. The worshipping community of All Saints Lutheran Church and La Iglesia Luterana de Todos los Santos is the result of the reorganization of three separate congregations into one; the properties of the former congregations were sold and the reorganized community has been worshipping in the building that was St. Luke's Lutheran Church on 85th St. here in Woodhaven. They have recently sold that building as well, and they must vacate their space by the end of August. As a gesture of Christian unity and to begin the hands-on exploration of partnership in ministry, we have invited that community to begin worshipping with us starting next Sunday. This is *not* a merger. All Saints Episcopal Church and the Lutheran Mission of All Saints/Todos los Santos will exist as separate entities financially and in diocesan and synodal jurisdiction. But over the coming weeks, you will see some new faces among us. Please show them our celebrated All Saints hospitality and a hearty welcome. Assist them during the mass, as they will not be familiar with our worship.

We need the Church, and the Church needs us, because we are all Peters. We are all the rocks on which Christ's church is built, and when we are distracted by life, the church grounds us. The community is the filler that makes the concrete and together we form a foundation that the gates of hell cannot break, because Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One is at its head. Christ is the church's only authority. Our mission as those who are called, the *ekklesia*, is to declare, "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." I will conclude by offering once again the Collect for today, which could not be a more appropriate prayer:

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Proper 16 (Year A, Volume 3)

SermonWriter, <http://www.lectionary.org/SW/08-24xo/Matt.16.13-20.htm>

Good Preacher, <http://www.goodpreacher.com/shareit/readreviews.php?cat=47>