

I Am a Rock... or Am I?

Matthew 16:13-19

August 21, 2011

Salvation comes through embracing the totality of life, celebration, growth, suffering, death, and hoped for resurrection. Faith is never abstract; it is a lived experience of following Christ and embracing the challenges, sacrifices, and joys of discipleship.

- Bruce Epperly (adapted)

Our gospel reading this morning requires a bit of introduction; perhaps even a heads-up. In this passage, you see, Peter makes out like a bandit, he comes out smelling like a rose, he is praised and applauded and christened far in advance a rock, the very foundation of the as yet to be created Church. In time he will grow into this role, and such plaudits will prove justified. But make no mistake, the Simon Peter Jesus addresses in this passage is a rascal. He is stubborn and obtuse, the chief among those who misunderstand Jesus and his mission. He makes a confession of faith here in Caesarea Philippi – such as it is - but he will go on to doubt, challenge, deny, and finally abandon Jesus in his darkest hour of need. So as we listen to the gospel reading, please remind yourself as needed that, “Peter has a long way to go.”

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.’

See what I mean? Peter comes off looking pretty good in this passage. He makes the so-called good confession that will be lifted up as the standard bearer of salvation to our day. He confesses a belief that Jesus is, “The Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Now the keys of the kingdom are his, the Church will be built on this rock, and the gates of glory will be opened to him. But I can’t help but wonder; if this is true, why go on from here? Why not end the gospel here?

After all, we have all the information we need to confess our belief about Jesus. The gospel is, seemingly, complete.

Many people in our day act as if this were true. That is to say, they reduce spiritual commitment and the life that springs from it to a confession of belief *about* Jesus. In their estimation, salvation is all wrapped up in what you believe about God. Salvation has to do with affirming a creed; stating clearly, coherently, perhaps even eloquently what you believe about God. Yet if such is the case this gospel is done, it's over, it's finished right here in Caesarea Philippi.

And yet Jesus has not yet faced his greatest trial. He has yet to endure the very suffering he mentions in this passage; the suffering that will prove redemptive for many. Moreover, Jesus invites Peter and the others to follow him on the path that leads through suffering to life. It would seem that this gospel is far from over; it would seem that Peter and the others have a long way to go before they can fully embrace faith. And it would seem that the faith they are called to embrace has more to do with following Jesus - with actually walking the way of faith and living out its commitments – than with expressing beliefs about God, or acquiescing to a creed.

Peter has a long way to go before he can be called a rock or a pillar of faith with a straight face. No sooner that Jesus tells Peter he will be the foundation of the Church, he proves that he has no idea what it really means to call Jesus Messiah. When Jesus mentions the suffering the Messiah will undergo, Peter interrupts and challenges Jesus' understanding. That's crazy talk, Peter implies. Don't go scaring people off by talking about suffering and death. Everybody knows that the Messiah is all about victory, power, and glory. Everybody knows that the Messiah will right the wrongs committed against God's people, and restore their kingdom to its former and rightful glory.

Peter will have to walk farther with Jesus before he understands the way of faith. He will have to let his own weakness' be revealed, his own cowardice exposed. For this Peter will deny Jesus again and again; this Peter will abandon Jesus to his suffering and death; this Jesus will despair and give up all hope of God's salvation. Peter has a long way to go. He will have to follow Jesus – embracing the life of faith Jesus offers – before he will understand the confession he makes so casually here in the clear light of day.

Peter will change. He will grow into the pillar described by Jesus in this passage. But the change will not come because of a new idea about God. Rather, the change will come precisely because he follows Jesus; precisely because he learns through experience what it means to put his

faith in God. Here at the beginning Peter musters the bit of faith he has and takes a first, tentative step in faith. As he follows from here he will stumble, fall, and even willingly lose himself along the way. But he will learn through these mistakes, because God will touch him, God will show him what forgiveness is like, God will engender courage and faith bit by bit, step by step. God will use and build upon every experience, every misstep, every prayer, every miniscule increase in faith; God will transform and mold this Peter into a rock of faith.

The tradition about Peter's death bears this out. It is said that upon learning that he, too, would be crucified, this one who had proven so obtuse, stubborn, and inconsistent, this one who had misunderstood and been so brash as to correct his rabbi, this one who had doubted, this one who had denied, this one who had abandoned would request to be crucified upside down so as not to be confused with his Lord.

Peter became a rock of faith because he followed; Peter had a long way to go but he got there, not because of what he said, but because of what he did. I don't know about you but I find this good news, because I have trouble thinking of myself as a rock. I don't find myself to be so rock solid in my faith. I don't find myself faithful and consistent. Sometimes I stumble, sometimes I stray, sometimes I feel that my faith is held together by duct tape or baling wire. I have a long way to go, but this is okay, because if I will follow as best I can, God will build on that experience through the stumbles, through the fumbling, through everything. If I will just follow, God will mold me and transform me in God's own image.

This is true for all of us. The gift from God we call salvation is not based on what we say about God. Rather, it's based on our willingness to follow, to walk in faith, to let God's grace flow through us and touch the lives of others, to be compassionate rather than talking about compassion, to transform the world even as we are transformed.

Warning; this is where faith gets difficult. It's easy to make a confession of faith about Jesus. Just ask Peter; I'm sure he was exhilarated that day so long ago in Caesarea Philippi. It's not so easy, however, to witness from your own experience what God is like; to share what God's forgiveness and compassion actually feel like; to know from experience that you will not see God someday, far down the line when life as we know it is all used up, but see and feel God daily in your life.

Peter comes off looking pretty good in the passage we shared together today, and eventually he fulfilled the prediction of Jesus, who seemed to be looking a far piece down the road when he called Peter a rock. Because to be a rock Peter had to embrace all of life; not just affirm a belief in God but live that belief and embrace the excitement, sorrow, and even the suffering of life as means to be transformed in faith over time; step by step, day by day, vision by vision, gift by gift. Peter became the rock that Jesus predicted of him. We, too, can become rocks if we will let God in Christ mold us in faith as we follow Jesus.