

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “The Rock of Faith”
Isaiah 51:1-6; Matthew 16:13-20
August 26-27, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Look carefully at the lintel over our chancel area and you’ll see a design of equilateral triangles and sets of three interlocking circles. Why??

Right. Equilateral triangles and 3 interlocking circles are symbols for the Holy Trinity, three Persons in one God. Geometry doesn’t give me a warm fuzzy, though, so I prefer the shamrock as a representation of the Trinity: after all, a shamrock is **alive**. In our assigned readings for this weekend, the metaphor we find is a **rock**. From Isaiah we heard:

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.*
Isaiah 51:1b

The rock is a reference to Abraham and the quarry refers to his wife Sara. If I were a geologist I might love that language. But I’m not and I’m definitely rooting for something more poetic.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is my ever-and-always favorite metaphor. Jesus as the Vine works really well, too: vines are living things. Jesus as the Bread of Life is heartwarming because it sounds nourishing and almost smells good. Jesus as the Light of the world shines with so many possibilities! Honestly, though, I have to work a lot harder to get excited about Jesus as the **stone** that the builders rejected, the lingo used in Psalm 118, our assigned psalm every Easter Day.

*The **stone** that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*
Psalm 118:22

In today's Gospel Jesus asks His disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" (Matt. 16:13) and after they answer He gets to the **real** heart of the matter and asks, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (Matt. 16:15) Peter comes up with the star response, "*You are the Messiah, the son of the living God*" (Matt. 16:16), and Jesus praises him for making that simply spectacular confession of faith:

...."God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out." (Matt. 16:17-18, *The Message*)

So here's a question for you to think about: did Jesus call Peter a rock because he **is** one already or because he'll need to **become** one? Maybe Jesus naming Peter was like a parent naming a newborn: sometimes we label a son or daughter by the quality we hope they'll become. For example, Audrey and Briana both mean *strong*; so do Ethan, Alexander, Gabriel and Liam. Adeline and Agatha mean *kind*. Cedric means *kind and loved*. Dalila means *gentle soul*. Agnes means *lamb*. The names *Faith* and *Hope* speak for themselves. Christopher means *Christ-bearer*. (Lucifer means *light-bearer*, but let's all stay away from that one!) So maybe Jesus both saw leadership qualities in Simon Peter **and** gave him a challenging name to grow into.

This Gospel is probably being heard differently at Holy Trinity and at St. Denis, St. Mark's and St. Catherine-St. Margaret's! This is the exact Gospel used to explain the special role of "pope" in Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic belief is that the Pope is the direct successor of Peter and the "vicar of Christ" on earth. Another one of the Pope's titles is Pontifex Maximus; it means supreme high priest. Our Lutheran perspective is different. Peter had a unique and very significant role in the early Church; he always comes first in

the list of the Twelve Apostles. It is he whom the risen Lord would ask three times, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” and Peter whom the risen Lord would delegate to: “*Tend my sheep.*” “*Feed my lambs.*” (See John 21:15-19)

Martin Luther might have felt differently about Pope Leo X (who ended up excommunicating him), if it hadn't been for the sale of indulgences and his extravagant lifestyle. (Leo X was, after all, a Medici, accustomed to wealth and the **very** finer things in life.) Luther was incredibly angry that the Pope would use forgiveness of sins as a fundraising scheme to bankroll his expensive tastes and to rebuild a decrepit St. Peter's Basilica. Salvation is a priceless **gift** God **freely** gives, not a **reward** we could somehow **earn** or **pay for**. Our redemption is made possible by what **Jesus** has already done; it is not driven by anything **we** could **ever** do. Lutherans and Roman Catholics actually came to an Agreement on Justification in 1999. We respectfully acknowledge Pope Francis as the Roman Catholic Bishop of Rome and worldwide head of the Roman Catholic communion. Our Lutheran church structure is very different. We have synodical bishops and a presiding bishop of our national church, but no single head of our worldwide Lutheran communion. No bishop is believed to speak infallibly.

Going back to Jesus as the *stone that the builders rejected*: those verses from Psalm 118 are echoed at the end of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:10-11), the one about the no-account fellows who rough up and then kill the son of the owner of the vineyard. The vineyard owner's son represents Jesus, and the wicked tenants are the religious leaders who reject and condemn Him. In the Gospels, Jesus continually predicts that He will be arrested, will suffer, and will be executed before rising again, but nobody

wants to hear such a dire prediction and the first part about his dying and death are so awful that his listeners almost literally can't hear the last part about His resurrection.

The first Passion prediction in St. Matthew's Gospel comes immediately after today's Gospel lesson. Peter, whom Jesus just **praised** for his confession of faith that Jesus is Messiah, exclaims, "Stop with the negativity!" and Jesus responds, "Get behind Me, Satan!" Whoa, the speed with which Peter crashes gives us whiplash. Along with his three-fold denial of Jesus in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus is being tried inside, what a reminder that Peter, called the proto-apostle, always first in the list of the Twelve, Peter the Rock has a lot in common with us. Peter confesses Jesus as Lord. So do we. But Peter can't figure out why suffering, why the cross, has to enter into the equation. Sometimes we can't either.

In Holy Baptism each of us received the same name, *Christian*, which means follower of Christ. To follow in His footsteps is to walk the way of the Cross, whether we understand the ins and outs of that or not. William Barclay, one of my favorite Bible commentators, wrote wisely when he said, "Christianity never consists in knowing **about** Jesus; it always consists in knowing Jesus."¹ By God's grace, may we come to know our Jesus more and more intimately, confess our faith more freely, and understand that **every** believer is part of the foundation rock of faith on which other generations will build. Amen

¹William Barclay. *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2 (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 138.

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