

“The Rock”

Matthew 16:13-20

August 21, 2005

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¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ ¹⁴ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ¹⁵ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.’ ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Prayer.

In today's world of Americanized Christianity, it appears to the casual observer that the church is divided into two opposing camps. This bi-polar, or two opposing opposites, way of viewing the world is loosely patterned upon the prevailing political matrix. Main line denominations are generally identified as socially liberal, in decline, and generally aligned with the Democratic party. Right wing evangelicals are generally seen as socially conservative, on the rise and growing, and generally in line with the Republican party. I know these are very broad brush strokes. However, they are generalities that seem to fit the mood of the nation.

I would suggest that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is more complex than this casual observation. Good Biblical scholarship defies categorization. Jesus' parables of the Kingdom don't simply convey ideology or political persuasion. They aren't concerned with capitalism or communism, free markets or socialized governments. Jesus' parables of the Kingdom don't mention life, liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. Nor do they lift up Lenin, Mao, Castro, or any revolutionary theocracy. Jesus has no concern for titles like liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, fundamentalist or evangelical.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the focus of his Kingdom parables has everything to do with the conversion of society, however. Ushering in the Kingdom of God means the current status of life and society are meant to be turned upside down, reconstructed from the ground up, rebuilt on a foundation that is as solid as a rock.

- This new world order will look a lot like the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 – blessed are the peacemakers, those who mourn, the hungry, the poor ... etc.
- The new world order will look a lot like the most important commandments – to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as our selves.
- The new world order will be aligned with the cross; anchored by a call to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.
- The Kingdom of God will follow Jesus from an empty tomb, bringing new life, eternal life to all those who believe.

Though there has always been some debate in Christian circles about **how** the Kingdom of God would be established on earth as it is in heaven, we have remained relatively unified throughout the course of 2,000 years of church history by the belief that God's Kingdom **will** be established, whether we're prepared or not. The Kingdom is coming, Jesus tells us. How, where or why? – well, that's left up to theologians and academics. The Kingdom of God is coming. What will be your response?

Interestingly enough, some people respond with hostility directed towards the church. You've heard it. I've heard it. I've even taken part in it at times when I've been weak and easily tempted. I think of it as **“the piling on syndrome,”** as in a game of football. “Organized religion – who needs it?” It doesn't usually take long for the issue to come up in a social setting before everyone has joined in with a litany of complaints against the church. Episcopal authority, shell-game finances, clergy indiscretions, mean spirited clergy and church killers, bad church experiences ... you name it. The list is often long.

Our Gospel lesson for today makes the point that the church we are often loathe to complain against is **the church of Jesus Christ**. It is His church, His body, His creation. And when we tear it down, we are tearing down Christ. Pride and ego tempt us to believe that this is my church, or their church, luring us to pile on with the complaints when something goes wrong. We are mistaken if we think that the church is owned by bishops, run by a pope, led by organized institutionalism or a board of directors. It isn't. The pastor isn't the leader. Neither is the Lay Leader.

This is the church of Jesus Christ. He is the head, the leader, the one and only cause and purpose of our existence. And it is only by the grace of God that we've been

claimed – that we've been elected – that we've been adopted as a child of God – and included in this marvelous community, known as the church.

The Kingdom of God is coming. What will be your response?

The response of most people today is casual indifference. “Philosophers have noted how, in the modern world, there has been the development of what they call the 'onlooker consciousness,' that stance of perpetual detachment. We stand back, we watch the world go by, we abstract, objectify, detach, assuming the role of perpetual tourist, just passing through, the onlooker, never actually alighting anywhere.”¹ This is the whole rubber-necker syndrome. This is the air head approach to faith.

Most of the disciples in today's Gospel respond to Jesus' inquiry about who the Son of Man is with casual indifference. “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”² You can almost hear them thinking to themselves, “Give me a break, would ya Jesus? Don't pin me down. Maybe a few generalized statements about what 'others' are saying will sit you down and shut you up.” His bone-headed disciples wanted to place Jesus in the context of their messianic expectations, their conventional hope for how God might move to deliver them from their oppressors.

But Jesus wouldn't bite. He wouldn't respond to their wishy-washy, take no stand, limp, spineless attitude. Where there is no commitment - there is no passion. Where there is no commitment – there is no hope.

The Kingdom of God is coming. What will be your response?

There is a small, but growing minority of Christians who are willing to make a stand, to claim a commitment to Jesus Christ and to work for His Kingdom. I don't want to know what others think or say or do. What do you believe? I don't care that you've taken a college class in comparative religions. I don't care if you carry a Bible zipped up in an embroidered cover. Who cares what nine of ten average Americans think? Speak up! What do you believe?

Jesus turns to the one who had remained silent. “Peter! ... who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’³ Finally, Peter

1 Willimon, W.H. “Speak Up,” Pulpit Resource, August 21, 2005. 33 (3)35.

2 Matthew 16:14, NRSV.

3 Matthew 16:15b-16, NRSV.

gets it right; he trumps the other disciples.

Peter is willing to answer the question of faith put to him by Jesus. **This is what I believe** ... Peter so eloquently proclaims. Kudos for you, Peter. “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.’⁴

You see, Jesus is quite capable of building a church with people who are willing to take a stand, make a commitment, proclaim their simple belief to all who will listen. Jesus is able to take the witness of people willing to proclaim their faith, and use it as a foundation for His church. “This is what I believe!” Is what captures Jesus' imagination.

What Jesus doesn't show any interest in, is using the indifferent or the complainers as the raw materials to build His church. “Thanks, but no thanks,” Jesus tells the religious rubbernecks and onlookers. There are too many apathetic Christians, who have back slid, who have just stopped caring. “I'll find someone else; someone more like ... Peter.”

The question lifted up by our Gospel lesson for today isn't about what other people believe or think. The question is personal. It is about you and me: On what are you willing to stake your life?

Who do you say that Jesus is? Is he your Lord, your Redeemer, your Savior? Is he your rock, your sward, your shield? Stand up and proclaim your belief! Stand up and draw a line in the sand, saying “this is what I believe and this is where my commitment lies.”

Avoid forming a line; of becoming just another complainer. That job is already taken by plenty of others. When it comes to faith, avoid perpetual detachment. There are plenty of Christmas and Easter Christians who just want to get by in life without rocking the boat or making an issue of what they believe. Too bad for them.

Take heart; today, Jesus is looking for a few people who aren't scared away by the terms 'responsibility' or 'commitment.' Jesus is looking for some good building materials, upon which he can build his church. Are you ready to be used as his foundation? Are you prepared to witness to what you know to be true?

4 Matthew 16:17-18, NRSV.

Like Peter, join with me this day and make a stand. “This is what I believe: Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the Living God.”

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.