

# **A FLAWED FOUNDATION**

**Preached by**

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**For Reflection:** *"As Paul Minear says, 'The New Testament Church is not so much a technical doctrine as a gallery of pictures.'" William Willimon*

**Hebrew Scripture:** *Isaiah 51:1-3,15-16*

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. For I am the Lord your God who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the Lord of hosts is my name. I have put my words in your mouth and hidden you in the shadow of my hand, stretching out the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, "You are my people."

**Gospel Reading:** *Matthew 16:13-20*

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, "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." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

**Meditation:** *A Flawed Foundation*

On my *alma mater* Penn State's main campus is a monument known as "The Obelisk." It is composed of 281 blocks of building stone, arranged with the geologically oldest blocks at the bottom and the youngest at the top. It was built by the School of Mines in 1896 for the benefit of architects and builders, to enable students to study the weathering qualities of stones. As I prepared to preach today on this text about the earliest building blocks of the church, it occurred to me that the obelisk was built about 1860 years too late to help Jesus choose the stone for the foundation of his church.

Peter? Jesus chose Peter!?! He had at least eleven other choices. What about Peter's brother Andrew, who brought Peter to Jesus? In fact, Andrew was always bringing a friend to Jesus. If Jesus wanted the movement to continue and grow after his death, why not Andrew?

(The fact that Jesus didn't pick the one who was always bringing a friend to him is not an excuse for not inviting friends and co-workers to church.) If not Andrew, what about James? He was one of the inner circle. Other than one petty argument with his brother about who would be first in the kingdom, he had a lot to commend him. Why not John, presumably the beloved disciple, the original Teacher's pet? Jesus trusted John with the care of his mother after his death—but not the church's? Let's not go there. How about Matthew? He was a known sinner. Surely, he would have drawn all those people to whom Jesus was preaching and healing of affliction; plus, as a tax collector, he would have been a whiz at stewardship and budgeting. Matthew would have been a good choice. Not choosing Judas, (although he did have great concerns for justice and mission) and doubting Thomas (the best leaders surround themselves with those unafraid to question) probably made sense. We don't know a lot about the other disciples, but the scriptural picture suggests that no one was writing in disciple yearbooks "most likely to succeed". They might have been loyal and impetuous, but they weren't the brightest bulbs on the tree. Yet, even in that less than stellar company, Peter stood out as a flawed disciple. Peter unpredictably mixed admirable discipleship with things that must have made Jesus question his criteria for building materials while he was alive, let alone after he was gone.

Jesus chose Peter. We know a lot about him. Before meeting Jesus, Peter was a fisherman. Along with James and John, he dropped his nets and left the family business to follow Jesus. He had a family. His brother Andrew, another disciple gets frequent mention. Scripture also mentions a mother-in-law. While I am only a casual student of anthropology, I know of no other way for a man to get a mother-in-law than by acquiring a spouse. He was married or widowed when he became a disciple, and retained responsibility for a household.

So far there is nothing here that gives pause in Peter's selection, although we have to wonder if he could give his full attention to the church with all those family entanglements. I suspect, however, that it is the behavior of the disciple Peter (whose name means "rock") that leads us to wonder if he were the right rock on which to build the church.

Peter often took the role of Jesus' straight man. Peter witnessed miracle after miracle, but always seemed surprised when another one occurred. His love for Jesus once led him to encourage Jesus to turn away from the cross and death—the only time we heard Jesus get angry with him. Peter wavered between utter trust that allowed him to walk on water to trembling faith that sank him like a stone. Even after this moment of appointment, he is no smarter or better a disciple than we have seen so far. He'll want to build tents of glory when he needs only to watch and wonder. He'll fall asleep when Jesus aches desperately for his presence.

In the midst of this erratic life of discipleship, in answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Some say that it's the avowal itself on which Jesus founded the church. Maybe. Yet, we know all too well the waxing and waning passions of our own commitment to Christ to think that would be any sturdier a foundation than the one who uttered it. Peter's was an answer born of God's grace. In its time and place it was also an answer of radical theological and political import. We, of another time and place, often miss the courage it would have taken to speak. We cannot, of course, overlook the upcoming cowardice of Peter's predicted three denials of keeping company with Jesus. Oh, we know Peter's strengths and foibles. So did Peter. Perhaps the only judgment harsher than history's about Peter's denial was his own.

So it was, that later on, during a post-resurrection fish fry, whether it was for Peter's sake or the sake of the church to be built upon him, Jesus gave him the opportunity to affirm his love and discipleship once again. Frederick Beuchner wrote of that occasion, "[a third time] ... Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep,' and you get the feeling that this time Peter didn't miss the point. From fisher of fish to fisher of people to keeper of the keys to shepherd. It was the Rock's final promotion, and from that day forward he never let the head office down again."

Jesus chose Peter: this broken, battered, courageous, cowardly, confused man with a wife, a failing family business, a mother-in-law and a brother who kept bringing home strangers and expecting Peter to find a way to make them welcome. Jesus chose Peter: this disciple who knew the Messiah when he saw him and would deny and desert him within days. To this one, Jesus said, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church ... 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."

Whatever those words mean to us, it's clear, at least, that the early church identified a particular role of authority for Peter in their life together. He wasn't the one to find the tomb empty. He wasn't the first one there after the news was shouted. He was the one for whom all others stood aside. Throughout the book of Acts and in Paul's letters, it's clear that in the early church Peter was a recognized authority—particularly with the authority to "bind and loose," – to let in or keep out.

It's an authority Jesus later gave to his gathered community—an authority that has been handed down to us as the church in this time and place. Understanding and exercising that authority and perhaps, more importantly, the accompanying responsibility to discern whom God calls to join us in life in ministry may well not be who we expect them to be. In today's world, even households who nominally look like ours did ten or twenty or more years ago, live very different lives, have very different spiritual needs, opportunities and obligations. Thinking or planning in ways that served us well then won't work now—and that has nothing to do with the pandemic. In this day, our day, it might be helpful to consider how the one first given that authority and responsibility used it.

For it was only after Jesus' death that Peter truly came into his own. If scripture gives us a clearer eyed view of Peter than any other disciple, it also suggests that Peter knew as well as we the splendor and scandal of his capabilities. Perhaps Peter had a spirit of generosity toward others that is acquired in no other way than radical self-awareness.

Maybe Jesus' reason for choosing Peter was his fallibility, his human-ness, and his stunning courage, not just in making a statement, but in getting up again and again, in following and answering, in truly accepting the forgiveness of Christ after even a spectacular failure, in his knowing that if it all depended on him, then all was lost. Perhaps Jesus chose Peter because he knew himself to be flawed and was utterly reliant on the only firm foundation of the church. Maybe Jesus' picked Peter—because he knew that, insofar as he depended on Christ and gave glory to God, he had a prayer for becoming the person Christ called him to be—a foundation stone in the building of something much larger than himself. Maybe that's why Jesus chose him for the authority of binding and loosing.

If what Peter bound and loosed on earth is indeed as it is in heaven, the cartoons are all wrong. A grim St. Peter is not standing in front of the locked gates of heaven, asking Double

Jeopardy questions of salvation. He's standing inside the gates he has already flung open, arms wide in welcome, saying, "Come. I've made a place for you. And you won't believe who else is here." With a little chuckle, he'll probably add, "A few of them will be fairly surprised to see you as well."

Jesus chose Peter, a very flawed foundation on which to build his church. The church still reflects its human beginnings. From its base to its pinnacle, it is weathered, worn, chipped, broken and often seems to teeter on its flawed foundation. We, more recently laid living stones (no more or less flawed or world-worn than those who came before us), can feel ourselves sway alarmingly in the winds of change and circumstance. I imagine Peter often felt that as we do. He knew what it was to hide in an upper room on a frightening Sunday night. It's very tempting to lock out all the things that scare us and let in only those who are like us, thinking that in that way we'll assure ourselves lives both safe and full.

But Peter left that room. And in a post-resurrection life, he never again used those keys for locking anything up. Instead, he used those keys to unlock doors of condemnation into a baptism of hope; he used his power to bind up wounds, healing the sick and raising the dead. He used his authority to loose the standards of the ancient Jewish community to include Gentiles (a group that would eventually include us); to shatter age old dietary restrictions while respecting those who kept them; who welcomed and incorporated into Christ's ministry whatever outcasts, sinners and strangers Jesus or his brother Andrew brought to dinner. He embraced them all in the circle of God's love and the grace of hope in Christ.

Now it's our turn. We are part of the community which has also received the authority and responsibility to loose and bind. We who have been graced with faith, found life in Christ, and inherited the charge to take care of Christ's sheep, binding and loosing on earth, as it will be in heaven—we will do well to look to Peter to see how to proceed. Like him, we might give up pride and self-righteousness, receive forgiveness, and dare to surrender ourselves to Christ's leading. If we honestly see ourselves to be flawed and human, and so look at others through more generous eyes, who knows what wounds might be bound up, what relationships might be reconciled, how our ministry might be transformed, what love might flow, what hope might be revealed, and what joy might flood into the world through us. Jesus chose Peter. And Jesus chose each one of us and all of us together to be his community. Let us do as Peter did, that we might see what God can do through us.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

Most loving God: We come to you this morning, praying for all people; those we know and those we will never know. We come knowing that the tears of your joy and compassion are shed for all of us.

We remember all those who are sick; sick of mind and body and soul; those who are rejoicing in healing; those who are adjusting to chronic disability; those who are facing surgery; those who have received diagnosis of a terminal disease; those who are struggling with addictions of all kinds. We ask you to remember all these people as well—to be with them and their families and friends; working for healing and wholeness. Help them to find comfort in pain, light in the darkness and companionship in loneliness and fear.

We remember all those who are hungry; who are poor; who are jobless; who are facing

financial difficulties. We ask that you give them strength and hope in their struggles. We ask to that in you, we all find the compassion to do your work and share our gifts that they might know a different way of living. We ask to that you grant wisdom and provide your guidance to those who we have chosen as our leaders; in government and business that as they make their decisions according to your justice.

We remember to all those who know joy this day and this week. The ones who celebrate marriages and births and reconciliations. We rejoice with them in the knowledge that you too share their joy. Empower us all in days of joy to renewed energy and faith and trust that we might know once again and share the good news that in Christ we are indeed your people.

All this we pray in the name of your son, Christ Jesus: Our Father...

### **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day, our daily bread. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**