



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“I Will Build My Church”***

On This Rock a Lenten Sermon Series Part III

*Matthew 16:13-20*

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I am about to read a passage from Matthew that tells of the moment Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus responds with words that have echoed through the centuries:

**“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”**

Christians have been discussing that sentence for two thousand years.

What exactly is the rock?

- Peter himself?
- Peter’s confession of faith?
- Something else entirely?

Next Sunday you will hear this passage again. Today I will focus on what Jesus says about the church. Next week, Ben will focus more on Peter’s confession.

Which probably fits our job descriptions. As Senior Minister, I am supposed to spend a lot of time thinking about the church as a whole. Meanwhile Ben has relationships in his title — Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults — so it fits that he would talk about coming to know and confess Jesus.

So as we listen to this passage today, I want us to think less about Peter the individual and more about the church Jesus promises to build.



Matthew 16:13-20:

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

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...  
I will give you the keys of the kingdom.”

That verse has carried enormous weight in the history of the church — perhaps more weight than one sentence should have to carry.

The Roman Catholic Church has long understood these words to mean that the bishop of Rome stands in Peter’s line of succession (Peter’s connection to Rome is that he was martyred there). It is an impressive continuity, and it has helped the Roman Church maintain unity in ways Protestants sometimes envy.

Impressive. But the behavior of some of those popes makes one question the whole idea.

Protestants read the passage differently. We say that the “**rock**” is not Peter himself but Peter’s confession — his declaration that Jesus is “*the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” That interpretation has a certain appeal. It means the church rests on faith in Christ rather than on the moral excellence of its leaders.

How nice for us.

The difficulty, of course, is that through history the Protestant churches have divided over what “faith in Christ” means.

Let me tip my hand this morning.

I’m a churchd guy. Given who signs my paycheck, you might expect that. That’s fair. But, cross my heart, Millie and I really do plan to be churchd when Social Security and the Board of Pensions are paying our bills and not Second Presbyterian. And if we ever move from Roanoke, we plan on finding a church home... even though it will be hard to find one as wonderful as Second Presbyterian.

But I also know what you know. Ancient history and recent headlines provide plenty of fodder for those who want to criticize the church. And then there are personal stories. Some people have had experiences that drove them out of the church, while others have stayed but carry their wounds with them. We even have members here who are happy at Second Presbyterian but did not have positive experiences elsewhere.

So, the story of the church, like the story of Peter, is a mixed one.



I won't tell Peter's whole story because I don't want to spoil the sermons yet to be preached in this series. But the passage we just read—and the one that follows—give us the pattern.

Peter is the first person in Matthew's Gospel to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It is a shining moment. But almost immediately afterward he argues with Jesus about what kind of Messiah he should be. Jesus speaks of suffering love; Peter wants a conquering hero. Jesus turns and says, "Get behind me, Satan."

And that rhythm continues through Peter's life. He

- confesses boldly,
- fails publicly,
- and must be forgiven again and again.

Still, Jesus never retracts what he said. After the resurrection, the early church does gather around Peter and his confession that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.

Which is not to say that Peter or the early church, having seen the resurrected Christ, finally had it figured out. The church in Jerusalem, led by Peter, very nearly decided that Gentiles could not belong.

So where is this wondrous, faithful church Jesus says he will build on this rock — whether that rock is Peter himself or Peter's faith?

I've struggled with this. At one point I tried to solve the problem theologically. John Calvin spoke about a "visible" church — the flawed one we see — and an "invisible" church known perfectly only to God. But the longer I've lived with the church, the more I think Jesus meant exactly what we see: what was to be built is *a very human community*.

That seems particularly clear in our day when polarization, algorithms, and media silos push toward what I call "*single narratives*" when everything becomes one thing.

Good or bad,

- Republicans/ Democrats are just one thing,
- immigrants are just one thing-
- this country or that country,
- this people or that people,
- this religion or that religion,
- the Evangelical Church, the Progressive Church, the Church in general
  - is just one thing.

Reality is always more complicated than that, but if one wants to

- be for or against,
- accept or reject,
- leave or stay,

it is just easier to think that way.



Here is where I am today.

The only church possible is a human one. So when Jesus said, “**On this rock I will build my church,**” he never meant anything other than a church like Peter himself — capable of shining moments of witness, but also capable of failure and even, at times, shocking betrayal.

Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal;

led by bishops, congregational votes, preachers, or powerful families;

traditional, contemporary, online, hybrid;

in all its forms the church bears the marks of Peter’s story.

*It confesses boldly, fails publicly, and must be forgiven again and again.*

And yet, because we often think we are more than we are, we can’t help but believe something different. Peter thought he could be more faithful than everyone else, as if being “Peter” was the secret sauce. And the church sometimes thinks the same thing — that somehow being the church lifts us *above what other human institutions are capable of*.

That expectation is what *haunts the church* when it fails.

Not long ago I had a conversation with someone outside this community that helped me think about this more clearly.

I was talking with someone I know well and admire very much. She cares deeply about justice, about compassion, about the people who caught Jesus’ attention and received his ministry in the Gospels.

But she is no longer in the church.

She feels the church has let the world down — and let her down.

She admires this and other specific congregations and would admit that the church in general is not all one thing, but she’s experienced and heard enough to feel that it *is one thing she can do without*.

We were not arguing. It was a good conversation. At least it was good for me, because I knew I was going to preach on this passage and it gave me the chance to say out loud what I have been thinking about.

So, I asked a rhetorical question. “**What institution has *not* let you down?**”

Of course, what comes with a rhetorical question is that she doesn’t get to answer but the one who poses the question does. So I proceeded to *max eloquent*.

Well..., I proceeded to *max*.

I reflected on other institutions that I knew she and I care about.

Families claim loyalty — *family first* — yet families can be deeply dysfunctional and do harm. (Inspires a lot of disturbing books, plays and movies too).

Governments claim justice — *God and country; greatest country on earth* — yet governments wage too many wars and fail their citizens in other ways.

Schools promise to shape minds and change the world — yet education can serve greed and power as easily as wisdom.



*Every* institution falls short... lets us down... does harm.

So then I finally stopped waxing and asked a question that was not rhetorical: “What is so different about the church that you have given up on it?”

She gave a thoughtful answer. “The difference,” she said, “is that the church claims higher moral ground. It says it is the body of Christ. So I expected more.”

She was right. The church does make that claim.

I could only respond by telling her why I hang in there not only with my congregation, which inspires and feeds me, but also with the larger church, parts of which frankly disappoint me... sometimes embarrasses me.

The church can shine, but not on its own.

- The church shines when it stops pretending to stand on higher ground
  - and instead confesses its need for grace.
- The church shines when it remembers
  - that Jesus is Lord,
  - that mercy is real,
  - that forgiveness is possible.

Because the church is not built on Peter’s person or perfection. It is built on the grace that kept calling Peter back.

- Peter confessed boldly.
- He failed publicly.
- And he was forgiven again and again.

And that is the kind of church Jesus builds.

- A human one.
- A community whose Founder already knows we will fail —
  - and still calls us anyway.

When the church remembers that, it becomes what it was meant to be:

- A people who, grounded in grace,
- A people who worship in awe and pray for God’s help because they know they are not God.
- A people who listen to one another with grace... with compassion.
- A people who serve those Jesus served and loves those Jesus loved.
- And a people honest enough to admit that we do not do these things as well as we should.

That is why I hang in there and why I am here with you.

And I suspect that is why many of you are here too. Because we are learning, slowly and imperfectly, what kind of church Jesus was talking about when he said, “On this rock I will build my church.”



- Not a perfect church.
- Not a church made up of people who always get it right.
  - But a church made up of people like Peter — people who
    - confess boldly,
    - fail publicly,
    - and must be forgiven again and again.

And somehow, by the grace of God, that is still the rock on which Christ is building his church.

