

Year A, August 27, 2017
12 Pentecost (Proper 16)
Christ Church, Mexia

Today we get a glimpse of the plan for Christ's church. It will be established upon a rock and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.

Well, it seems that Jesus refers to Simon bar-Jonah (Simon, son of Jonah) as a rock. Matthew has been referring to him as Simon, who is called Peter, or Simon Peter since chapter 4 (verse 18), when the calling of the first disciples was reported. Now the word for rock in Greek is *petra* – and the name Petros or Peter is derived from *petra*. So, when Jesus says: "... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..." it is easy to see why the early church believed that Peter was the rock on which the church was built and based the tradition of Apostolic succession on this passage.

It is understandable that Jesus would want to found the church on a rock based upon the imagery evoked in the following definition associated with rock – one that is similar to or suggestive of a mass of stone in stability, firmness, or dependability.

But let's ask for a minute, does Peter really exhibit stability? For example, John names him as the one who cuts off the ear of a slave when they come to arrest Jesus. Firmness or dependability? In just a few verses later than today's gospel, Jesus refers to Peter as "Satan" for setting his mind on human rather than divine things, and isn't Peter the one who denies even knowing Jesus three times in one night? And we can add to this list. Peter doesn't seem to exhibit these qualities of stability, firmness or dependability, but yet we, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, tend to view him as the rock upon which the church was founded. I find that interesting. And while we're considering that, how many churches do you know, within the church universal, that exhibit these same three qualities? Now I'm not denigrating Peter or our churches, but these are qualities that are difficult to find in humans.

So let's look more closely at the scripture today. Jesus is asking the disciples, who people think he is. And there all sorts of answers... Then he brings it in closer to home – who do **you** think I am? And Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." And Jesus tells him, you didn't know that from earthly knowledge, God gave you that answer. But that's it – that's the point! "And I tell you,

you are Peter, and on **this** rock I will build my church..." Notice that Jesus didn't say "and on **you**, I will build my church." He says, this rock.

It seems to make more sense to ground the church on a concept, a truth, rather than a mere mortal person, doesn't it? A person may have it together today but will fail miserably tomorrow? Isn't it possible that the church, Christ's church, is built on the one inescapable truth, that he, Jesus, is the son of the living God? That statement has stability, firmness and dependability. That never changes. Could it be that "this" is the rock to which Jesus refers?

And the church? Well, that's another story. Jesus did say, "will build..." - a work in progress through the ages - still in progress. We might consider the church for a moment. Maybe you've heard these stories about church: "Two little boys in the neighborhood were talking. One said to the other, "You've been trying out all the churches in town. Which one did your family choose to attend?" The other boy said, "My mother likes the Episcopal *lethargy* best (Hodgin, 267)." Ouch, but sometimes true. Or then there was a pastor of another denomination, who "...was rather disappointed that things were not 'happening' in his church, and so he asked one of the leading deacons, "What is wrong with our church? Is it ignorance or apathy?" The deacon responded, "I don't know, and I don't care (Hodgin, 485)." I believe that deacon's name was Peter - or worse, maybe one of our names. Again, we tend not to be rocks.

As the Rev. Kirk Kubicek said, "It is not that God's church has a mission, but God's mission has a church." And we are that Church, the Body of Christ.

The church in bricks and stone and wood and glass tells (the) story and invites all who would be Christians to continue (the) story, so at the end of the day we are sent away: *Ite missa est* - 'Go, you are sent.' From which we get the word 'mass,' (by the way): (we are sent from here) to turn our lives towards others and toward God. To complete the work we begin in here, in actual fact we must return to the world beyond our doors. We are to live with other people and love them, just as we are to live with God and be loved by God. God's mission has a Church." And that church may not always be what it should be, being comprised of mere mortals, but it is founded on one inviolate truth - Jesus Christ is the son of the living God, and God had Jesus become incarnate as a model for our lives.

In closing, let me leave you with a thought from Br. Mark Brown, SSJE: "Our primary vocation as the church is to lift up the person of Jesus Christ himself – not Christianity, not Anglicanism, not Episcopalianism, not monasticism or any other -ism. Not a social agenda. Not a political platform. Not even good behavior, or good theology, or good liturgy." We are to emulate and imitate the mind of Christ.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.