

On This Rock  
Matthew 16:13-20

May 14, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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Let's have a pop quiz. No need to raise your hand or to write anything down, just see for yourself how well you can answer this question: What do you know about Peter, the disciple?

Well let's see: We know that Peter's original name was Simon, and that he and his brother Andrew were fishermen from the city of Bethsaida. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were their partners in fishing. And these four young men – Peter, Andrew, James, and John were the first four disciples that Jesus called, the ones he promised to make into fishers of men. (Matthew 4)

Peter was married, apparently. We know this because Jesus came to Peter's home and cured Peter's mother-in-law, who was sick with a fever. I wonder why we never hear about Peter's wife, and what did she think about him traipsing off around the countryside with Jesus, instead of bringing home fish every day? (Matthew 8)

When the disciples were in their boat and the wind and waves were rising, Jesus came to them, walking over the water. Peter called out, "Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." And Peter climbed right out of that boat. He did fine till he noticed the wind and the waves. He started to sink, crying, "Lord, save me!" Jesus caught him, saving his life. But then he said, "Oh you of little faith!" (Matthew 14)

Peter and James and John were present on the mountaintop at the Transfiguration, when Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah, all shining as bright as the sun, and Peter's response was, "This is great! Let me just build a few cabins and we can stay up here forever!" Jesus had other plans, of course, and other work to do. (Matthew 17)

Peter came to Jesus to ask, how many times do I have to forgive my brother? Do I have to forgive him seven times? I wonder what Andrew had done! Jesus, of course, said seven isn't nearly enough. Keep forgiving. (Matthew 18)

When Jesus talked about how difficult it will be for a rich person to enter the Kingdom, it was Peter who said, "But we have left everything to follow you. What will we get?" (Matthew 19)

At the Last Supper, Jesus predicted that Jesus himself was about to be betrayed and executed, and that Peter would deny even knowing him. Peter said, "Even if everyone else falls away, I will never, ever, ever deny you." Jesus said, "Before the cock crows this night, you will deny me three times." And, of course, when Jesus was on trial, Peter was out in the courtyard, denying he had ever met him. (Matthew 26)

When Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, it was Peter who said, "No, no, no! You don't wash my feet. I'm supposed to wash yours!" But Jesus said, "If you don't let me wash your feet, you have no part in me." So, Peter said, "Well then, don't just wash my feet, but my head and my hands, too!" (John 13)

At Gethsemane, Jesus pulled Peter, James, and John apart from the others to wait with him as he prayed to be delivered from persecution. They were not up to the task. They kept falling asleep. Jesus asked, "Could you not wait with me one hour?" And when Jesus was arrested, Peter is the one

who pulled out a sword and lopped off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus was not impressed. He told him to put his sword away. (Matthew 26)

And there was apparently something of a rivalry between Peter and John, his old fishing partner – John, known as the Beloved Disciple, the one Jesus loved, the one who lay right next to Jesus at the Last Supper. After the resurrection, when Mary Magdalene brought news that Jesus was risen, Peter and John raced to the tomb. Peter went into the tomb first. But John is the one who believed. (John 20)

How did you do on the pop quiz? Did you remember most of these stories about Peter? Do you get the picture of a disciple who acts first and thinks second? One who misunderstands Jesus, and does it really loudly? One who talks a big game? “Hey, Jesus, tell me to walk on water. Watch me, you guys! I’m going to walk on water!” Then he sinks like a stone.

And so, with this sort of collage of Peter stories in the background, we come to today’s passage, in which Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples all respond, “Some say that you are John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah,” (all presumably reincarnated). “But who do YOU say that I am?” Jesus asks. And it is Peter who answers first (pushing ahead of the others, as always), “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.” And Jesus says, “You are not Simon anymore. You are Peter [which means “rock”], and on this rock I will build my Church.” What an affirmation! Can you imagine how Peter felt when he heard that?

Yet, in the very next paragraph, Jesus tells the disciples that they are headed to Jerusalem now, where he will be arrested and crucified and then resurrected. Peter, true to form, pulls Jesus aside and says, “God forbid it. This must never happen!” And Jesus turns to his newly renamed disciple, the one whose faith is so great that he will be the foundation of the Church, and Jesus says, “Get thee behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block for me.” Literally, a rock over which Jesus stumbles. Peter the rock, the foundation. Peter the stumbling block. Peter can’t win for losing.

And so, I want to ask, “What was Jesus thinking?” Really, what was he thinking? He knew who Peter was, better than Peter knew it himself. Wouldn’t John, the Beloved Disciple, have made a better foundation for the Church? Or Mary Magdalene? She was faithful to the end. But no, Jesus chose Peter.

Someone has said that the greatest miracle in the whole Bible was Jesus building his Church with block after block of fallible people, and he chose to begin with this man who was soooo human, so brash, so fallible. Jesus entrusted his ministry here on Earth first to Peter, saying simply, “If you love me, feed my lambs. If you love me, tend my sheep.” The Church was always going to be made up of people, fallible people, people with irritating foibles and blind spots, people with good hearts and limited energy, people who talk a better game than they deliver, people who are doing the best that they can, people who are not God. People like us. Jesus depends on us, calls us, to rise above ourselves, to be the Church. The Church has survived all these years, doing God’s work the best we can. We should have a little patience with ourselves and with one another about that.

Here's another question for the pop quiz: How do you feel about Peter as the foundation of the Church? I don’t know about you, but it makes me a little queasy. I am happy to honor Peter’s role in founding the Church, and Paul’s and James’s, and all those early women who spread the word and didn’t get the credit. But I have never looked to them as the foundation on which the Church is built.

Fortunately, the Bible gives us another passage, one that is repeated several times in several places, that tells us otherwise. The Bible says it is Jesus Christ who is the stone that the builders rejected

that has become the chief cornerstone. We sang about it this morning – Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone. The choir sang, I'm building my home on the rock of Jesus. We will sing about it at the end of the service, too – on Christ, the solid rock, I stand. If you go to Horton Center this summer you will get to sing, Jesus is the rock and he rolls my blues away. Jesus is our rock. The risen Christ is our cornerstone.

Our ability to be the Church, to do God's work in this world despite our humanness, owes maybe a little bit to Peter and others who helped to get the Church started, but it owes everything to Jesus Christ. We should honor the human leaders of the Church, from Peter to today, but we should never, ever mistake the one who is our rock and stay. It is Jesus' grace, his love, his sacrifice, his triumph, his power which are our sure foundation. We are building our home on the rock of Jesus. Christ is the solid rock on which we stand.

Thanks be to God! Amen