

Sept 1          Bedrock or Stumbling Block?

Matthew 16: 13-23

This time in Peter's life symbolizes what happens to all of us, on occasion, in our lives. In just a few minutes he goes from being praised by Jesus for his faith that is celebrated as being rock solid to being told by Jesus that he is an agent of the devil and what he is sharing would be a stumbling block to Jesus and others. Another translation says he is like loose gravel that can cause people to lose their footing and fall.

We like to celebrate how we show a rock solid faith that we and others can lean upon. Yet, when we are completely honest, we confess that our faith sometimes is more like loose gravel or worse a stumbling block to others. Today we are going to look at what gives us rock solid faith and also examine when we become a stumbling block. And then we will spend just a few moments on a couple of other things Jesus brings up, that are minor, but the church has made a big deal about them over the years.

### *Rock Solid Faith*

The events we read about begin with Jesus asking a question, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples were quick to shout out answers, "Elijah, Jeremiah or even the Spirit of John the Baptist." Then he asks the harder question: "Who do you say that I am?" Up to this point, Jesus has not identified himself as the Messiah. The disciples had seen all the miracles and had come to some conclusions as to who Jesus was. Now he wants to know what they are thinking. I think there was an awkward silence and then Peter is the only disciple brave enough or foolish enough to attempt an answer.

Why did Jesus ask the question? I am sure he wanted to know what thoughts had crystalized in the minds of these men he was training. I wonder if he believed that a formal declaration about him would strengthen their faith. Or, did Jesus believe that the time had come for him to start sharing that he was the Messiah? It might have been one of these reasons or something else. We don't know. What we do know is that when Peter answers saying Jesus is the "Christ, the Son of the Living God," Jesus says that his answer comes direct from God.

It seems likely that Peter in saying “you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” meant that Jesus was the anticipated king sent by God. The Jewish people believed that the messianic king would have a special relationship to God, as a father to a son. They felt that this is the type of relationship King David had with God. We know from the later conversation that many of the old notions of Messiah and kingship were there. These were images of revolution, and power and freedom. But it seems likely that Peter was also beginning to grasp that there might be something more to Jesus than met the eye. He was beginning to embrace that in Jesus God was doing a new thing. This idea is what Jesus said could only come from God. With this affirmation, Jesus affirms that Peter has lived up to his nickname. He is a rock. On it Jesus will build his church, his called out ones. This is the first time the word church is used by Jesus. It seems to predict that at some point his message of love and forgiveness for all will break the bonds of Judaism as it goes out into the world.

We also need to realize that there was a bit of political rhetoric going on. “Son of the Living God” was a rebuke to terms used for Caesar who saw himself as a son of a God. So Peter was celebrating that Jesus was the long awaited one but also was anticipating conflict with Rome.

All of this makes me ask myself some questions. What beliefs do I have that can only come from God? One of those is my belief in eternal life. It isn't something that can be rationally proved. I was told about it by others but I believe it because God placed that word in my heart. What are the truths that God has placed in your hearts?

I ask, “What are the rocks I build my life of faith on?” For me, one of those stones is love and compassion for others. I try to do everything out of the framework of what is best for the most. How can I show love?

What about you? You should spend some time thinking about what are some of the foundational rocks of your faith and name them.

Lastly, “In what ways can others rely and build on what I believe and do?” Jesus implied in this conversation with Peter that it is not enough to celebrate the truth God gives us nor is it enough to build a rock solid faith for ourselves. We are called to be a

foundation for others. We are to live in such a way that other can learn and grow in faith from us. I reflect on this idea often and it challenges me to try and live in a way that supports others. There are a lot of questions that come to us and we think about the question Jesus asked his disciples. Important ones to wrestle with. But today let us celebrate that we are at times a rock of faith. We have a faith and belief that can only come from God and others can rely upon it as well!

### *Stumbling Block*

Unfortunately, we are not rock solid in all that we say and do. Peter goes from Rock to Stumbling Block. He represents all of us whose heart is in the right place but is not thinking God thoughts. When Jesus begins to talk about how he must suffer at the hands of his accusers Peter was quick to object. Peter wanted success without a cross. This logic is a form of the temptation offered to Jesus in his time in the wilderness. He was offered all the kingdoms of the earth. He could have the power and glory without the cross. Jesus saw it as giving into the evil of this age instead of being faithful to God. He rejected it then and he rejects it when it comes to him in the voice of one of his faithful disciples. Peter meant well. He wanted to protect his friend. He wasn't trying to tempt Jesus. Yet this is what he did.

It makes me think about when I take the easy path instead of a more challenging one. It makes me think when I listen to the voices of this day instead of to the teachings of God. It makes me realize that when I give into these things it is more than my failing. It is a reminder that I have become loose sand that others cannot rely upon. Ouch, that hurts my feelings, just as I am sure Jesus' words stung Peter's heart. But we need to hear it, we need to see that faith calls us to a higher standard and listen to the one whom loves us. We need to be reminded that we are called to love and that means at times being willing to take up our cross.

### *Other Thoughts*

The one issue I need to address for a moment in this passage is where Peter is given, by Jesus, the keys of the kingdom of heaven and the authority to bind and to loose. The Catholic Church has taken these few words and run with them and created

an entire theology. Through it they say the church, and here they mean the Roman Catholic Church and particularly the Pope who is the successor to Peter, is the only ones able to forgive sins here on earth and offer heaven to people. Likewise, if one is condemned by the church they are eternally condemned with no chance of parole. I don't want to get too deep into this theology. What I want to do is step back and see what Jesus seems to be offering Peter.

According to Adam Hamilton Jesus promises Peter that the gates of the underworld, a figure of speech for all forces opposed to God's good will for life, won't be able to stand against his church. We seem to think that Peter was given the keys to lock in the evil of his day. What Jesus says is that the gates of hell are not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of the church. To Jesus the gates of hell are not locked to keep evil out but to try and keep the church from entering! The church is more powerful than the forces of evil. This implies that the church is meant to be actively engaged in the world. It is to live actively sharing the good news, to not be afraid.

How seriously does the church take this promise? When we see horrendous evil I hear, "All we can do is pray." That is a powerful force to unleash and we should pray. But even more, we need to be engaged, to actively combat the evil knowing that if the church is against it, it cannot stand for God is with us and we have been given the true power. This is risky, scary business. It is part of what it means to be a follower of Christ and to take up our cross and follow.

Why does Jesus command his disciples not to talk about his identity as the Messiah? Most would assume the Messiah would be one seeking to lead an armed rebellion and set up a new kingdom. This would draw all those who sought to throw off Rome's domination by force to Jesus. So he wished them to remain silent until they could comprehend his vision of Messiah, the suffering one.

Rock solid faith, shifting sands, engagement and reflection. A lot of things to ponder from that conversation in Caesarea Philippi.