

ROCKS THAT ROLL

A Sermon delivered at St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Virginia
On 26/27 August 2017 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost (PENT12A17)
Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Dear members and welcome guests of St. John's:

What's up with Jesus calling people names? If you attended worship last week you heard Jesus insult a desperate, foreign woman by intimating that she is nothing more than a dog. How crude and demeaning could he be? Had today's social media picked up on that slur, it would have irrevocably hurt his cause and his approval rating would plummet. As we soon discovered, the name calling had a constructive purpose and resulted in a positive ending.

In today's Gospel Jesus is at it again only not so harsh this time. How would you like it if he called you a rock? Rock isn't a very popular name today and after this week "Harvey" might fit into that category. Decades ago there was a famous movie star who adopted the name "Rock Hudson." He was a tall, handsome actor who became the heart throb of the Hollywood golden age. Then there's Chris Rock, former SNL cast member and the sports world has Rocky Marciano, a famous boxer. Maybe you can think of more - but otherwise, very few.

In today's Gospel lesson we find that Jesus put an asterisk beside the term "rock" translated into the Greek language as *petros* (Peter) and ascribed it to his lead disciple, Simon, in a name change that is as meaningful and it is significant. Then he tells this rock to get rolling because he needs him in a huge construction project that will change the world. Let's take a closer look to see what led up to this point and what has happened since.

The faithful twelve who followed their rabbi probably didn't know it but it was final exam time. To set it up, Jesus does something rather unusual. He changes the venue and takes them off on a three-day excursion 60 miles north to an area called Caesarea Philippi. This represented not only a change in location, but, more dramatically, a radical change in culture. Going from rural, conservative Galilee to this metropolitan mixing bowl would be like going from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas. Many there had adopted the Greco-Roman culture along with its pantheon of gods and goddesses.

But it gets worse. Then Jesus leads them outside the city into a valley that is shaded on one side by a huge rocky cliff. Into the side of that cliff had been carved large niches, each holding the statue of a Greek god – Pan, the god of herds and pastures being the chief one. And over there in the far corner there is a large stream which flows into that rocky cliff through the mouth of a cave and then disappears. Locals believe this stream flows all the way into Hades, the underworld, and that this cave is actually the entrance or the gate to Hades. Pilgrims and worshippers mill about offering sacrifices and performing rituals. Don't you feel sorry for those poor disciples? Their skin must be crawling with discomfort. Their angst level was soaring. This was so surreal.

And it is in the context of this most un-teachable moment that Jesus springs the two questions on the final exam; the first, a general polling question about his identity; the second, a specific individual or group consensus of what they believe about his identity. "Who do you say that I am?" We were not there to know how the answer came about. Was there total silence for a time? Did the disciples go into a group huddle or break down into subgroups to come up with a common answer? The context suggests that the answer was immediate, divinely revealed, and came from their leader, Simon. "You are the Messiah the Son of the living God."

With that Simon hit it out of the park because Jesus is so satisfied with his answer that he now commissions a remarkable building project. He says, *“I tell you that you are Peter (petros), and on this rock (petros) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* What did he mean by that? Opinion is divided basically between two schools of thought.

As we know the church was definitely established and prospered. But over the course of years as the eastern centers of Christianity collapsed under the invading Islamic hordes and as Teutonic tribes from the north invaded the centers of culture in the west, a vacuum of leadership was created politically and ecclesiastically. The bishop of Rome stepped in to fill that gap and, for a time did so very well. Eventually, justification for the extension of power for this office was found in this passage. It was asserted by today's text that Jesus here not only appointed Peter as the official leader of the church but established an official office that would be always filled by apostolic succession, giving the bishop of Rome absolute power.

The papacy as we know it did not exist until the time of Pope Gregory VII (1073 AD). It was he who established the College of Cardinals to take papal elections out of the hands of the political leaders. His famous decree, the *Dictatus*, contains the following assertions:

- The pope is the universal bishop who has been placed by God over all other churchmen;
- No council can sit in judgment upon a pope, nor does it have authority without papal approval.
- When the pope speaks from his official chair, *ex cathedra*, he cannot err;
- No book is authoritative until it has the official approval of the pope.

That power and that position were challenged during the Protestant Reformation. In 1537 the Lutheran reformers adopted as part of our confessional position a document titled “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope.” They unequivocally stated: “As to the statement, ‘On this rock I will build my church,’ it is certain that the church is not built on the authority of a man but on the ministry of the confession which Peter made when he declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God...nor is this ministry valid because of any individual's authority because of the word given by Christ (section 25). The rest of Holy Scripture certainly supports this interpretation. Not only Peter, but each of us who make the hard-rock confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is a little Peter or rock whose mission is to build the church on the rock of that confession. And fellow rocks, we need to get rolling.

Jesus didn't say it would be easy. The setting for this commission is not the placid, lakeside of Galilee but the salty and combative arena of the counter-culture that was Caesarea-Philippi or Washington, D. C. or Alexandria or Springfield. Jesus first put a timetable on that announcement – don't do it until after the resurrection. Well, that event has come and gone and is all the more reason we need to make the confession that Jesus truly was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Armed with the warmth of that gospel message, let us take the keys of forgiveness he gives us to lock the gates of Hades in a rocky landslide forever and to build the stone steps that lead us and others to the celestial door of eternal life. Amen