

UPON THESE ROCKS

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Matthew 16:13-19

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.”

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

When I began thinking about this text a few weeks ago, I just so happened to be doing so in a place with a lot of rocks. My father and I were on a two-week tour of Scotland, which in and of itself is a pretty rocky place, and I found myself emailing with Ted Gibboney from the St. Columba Hotel on the Isle of Iona. Some of you may know about Iona, which is a tiny island off the west coast of Scotland. It's been a holy place for as long as anyone knows or can remember, and it's Christian history begins in the fourth century and lasts right up into the present day in the spirit of the Iona Community.

The Iona Community is a dispersed membership of Christian believers who practice a strict discipline of prayer and commitment to shared resources and social justice. They host week-long retreats where people come and stay in the midst of an on-going intentional community, and offer worship services three times a day in the Iona Abbey, which is a magnificent 13th century church situated on a tiny, remote island. But the life of the Community all began with rocks.

In 1938 George MacLeod decided that the pastors of the Church of Scotland were a little out of touch with the struggles of the Scottish working class, and so he decided to take a group of ministers and unemployed stonemasons from the toughest areas of Glasgow up to Iona to help out in the rebuilding of the Iona Abbey, which has been in ruins since the Reformation.

This initial group formed the Iona Community and for several years the men worked together, lived together, ate together and slowly rebuilt the Abbey. The stonemasons led the ministers in the laborious process of rebuilding a 13th century church, and the pastors led the stonemasons in reflecting on what it meant to build an ancient church in the middle of modern life, until it became difficult to tell an Edinburgh minister from a Glasgow stonemason. And slowly, overtime, the ruins began to take shape as stone after stone was lovingly fit into the walls and floors of the Abbey.

But after about 20 years, something terrible happened. The Abbey was almost finished. What was the Iona Community about if they were not about rebuilding the Iona Abbey? It was at this time that the Iona Community found itself with a lot of rocks and nothing to build. And according to Ron Ferguson, an early member of the Community, it was at this time that the Community stopped building with their rocks and instead started to throw them at each other. There were factions with different interests and different views of how the Community should move forward, there were women, who had been completely shut out of the rebuilding process who were clamoring to be let in, there were pacifists and socialists and nationalists and capitalists, all trying to figure out the future of this band of believers. And in the middle there was George MacLeod himself, the Father of it all who was, by all accounts, a larger-than-life, extremely opinionated and visionary leader who could not stand to have his vision altered in the slightest. This rock-throwing lasted through his resignation as Leader of the Community, through his death, and for several more years until the Community began to build itself into a different form, one committed to community and social justice on Iona, in Scotland and throughout the world. Now, the community is building another unique ministry, using the stones that did not fit the old mold to create a new Abbey of Faith.

So it was within this context of church-building and rock-throwing that I began thinking about this text from Matthew and the text from Romans. In this passage Jesus asks pointedly for the disciples to testify to who he is, and like any band of believers, they are all over the place. But Peter, in a game-changing turn of events, speaks up with wisdom and authority and testifies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And in what will be a pattern of the church

for years to come, Peter inadvertently volunteers for something and all of sudden it becomes his responsibility for life. Jesus blesses him and, drawing on his previous experience with Peter, recognizes that this could not have come from his own knowledge but had to come directly from God, and so it is Peter who will get the keys to the kingdom and will be the stone upon which the Church will be built.

And we are left sort of wondering here, what was Jesus thinking? Peter got the answer right, yes, but his track record is not all that great. As pastor Jin Kim says, “He is constantly missing the point and often talks before he thinks. A few verses later Jesus calls him “Satan” for setting his mind on human instead of divine things. Then Peter later denies Jesus three times. How does one give the keys of the kingdom of heaven and build the church upon someone so unstable?”¹

Sadly, it can seem that this too is a pattern of the Church, that those who are in some ways least qualified for the job get handed the keys to the kingdom. When we look around at the Church in our modern day, it can seem as if it is built on an pretty unstable foundation. A few nights ago I got into one of those religious discussions that I somehow find myself in fairly often. A few friends were sitting around the patio and the discussion turned to the church. Among the faithful gathered we had myself, another Presbyterian, a Jehovah’s Witness, a guy who spent a year working for the televangelist Benny Hinn, a born-again evangelical, and an atheist. So you might imagine that our opinions about the church were varied, to say the least. And as we discussed the ins and outs of church, someone offered that familiar phrase, or at least one that is very familiar to me: “Well, I’m spiritual, but not religious.”

As it happens, I joined a little Facebook group a few years ago called “I’m religious, but not spiritual,” which is a light-hearted, somewhat satirical attempt to virtually reclaim the authority and relevance of the church in the midst of a culture that tends to see God as good and the church as bad.

And for me, and perhaps for you, this is something that I hear fairly often. If we could just get rid of the infrastructure and the buildings and the hypocrisy and the dogma and the fighting and the proselytizing and the money, always the money, then we could get back to the core and essence of our faith which is devotion to God and service in the manner of Jesus Christ. Now maybe since we are all gathered here, at church, this morning, none of us feel that way. But I’m sure that each one of us can point to a time, an instance, a conversation we’ve had and have thought to ourselves “This is not how the church should be,” a time when the church seemed better at throwing rocks at each other than building up the community. And when we get to that point, we wonder what we are supposed to do with the rocks that don’t fit. What can we build with them? What new thing is Jesus calling us to build? And why does it seem that we can turn so quickly from the builders of the church to a group that is ready to stone each other in the name of the Lord?

Well, perhaps it has something to do with how Peter was picked to be the rock on which the Church was founded. Kim says that in selecting Peter to be the rock of the Church, “Jesus was responding not to Peter’s particular strengths and accomplishments as a disciple (which left much to be desired) but to his *testimony* that said: “What I have experienced in you, Jesus, is that you are the Messiah, the one that has been sent to us as a gateway into the kingdom of God....”

The church is not founded on Peter, just as it is not founded on John the Baptist or Elijah, Luther, Calvin [or any one person]. The rock is not Peter but Peter’s *testimony*. Therefore...the underlying lesson is that the church is as resilient or fragile as each of us in our own faith...Jesus’ question to each of us is: “Who do *you* say that I am?” ...This is the rock on which the church is founded.”²

Perhaps this is why we find it so hard to build with our rocks or set them aside and wait for a space in which they will fit rather than throwing them. If we are each asked to respond to this question of “Who do you say that I am?”, if the Church is built by the testimonies of all of us, it will happen somewhere along the way that our testimonies will disagree. Even if we each answer exactly as Peter did, we will inevitably mean something different by our answer. Jesus the Messiah looks different to me, to you, to a pastor from Edinburgh, to a stonemason in Glasgow, to a Roman Catholic or a charismatic or a Pentecostal or a Presbyterian. It will appear as if the rocks are incompatible, that there is no way to make them fit together to build anything that resembles a church. And when we have rocks with which we cannot build, the temptation is then to start hurling them at each other.

And it’s here, in this tension of whether to build or to throw, that Paul’s words from Romans ring so true. Paul knew a little something about building churches and about throwing stones at each other. And over and over again, to the Corinthians, to the Ephesians, and here to the Romans Paul tells us to put our mismatched stones to the side and to build the Church with whatever we can. “For by the grace of God given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body, we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”³

Paul’s language about the body reminds us that each of us have a different function in the Church. The purpose and role of all of these stones of faith may not seem clear to us. In fact, when we look at some parts of the Church, we simply cannot see that Jesus is working through it to build anything at all. But Jesus has assured us that the gates of Hades will not prevail against us, that the Church will be bound and loosed in heaven and on Earth, and that Jesus can build upon even the rock of Peter, who, like us, will testify that Jesus is Lord one day and deny him the next.

Friends, Jesus has commanded for us to build the Church. “The Church is not merely a means to achieve a greater goal, not is it a voluntary association of like-minded individuals. It is an article of faith.”⁴ To each of us is given a great deal: our faith, our families, our heritage, our confessions, our politics, our passions, our talents and yes, our testimony.

And when it comes to building the Church, we are called to stand upon a solid foundation of God, incarnate in the world, and to work with the misshapen, imperfect stones that we have. We are called to build an Abbey of Faith, slowly and laboriously, side by side with people from very different walks of life.

At the end of the beginning of the Iona Community, Ralph Morton has this to say: “The Community has to make many decisions. The rebuilding on Iona is nearly finished. And we are so used to that work of rebuilding as giving the background for the Community’s life, that it’s hard to awaken to the fact that we must find another. The door is open – to strange possibilities and great demands.”⁵

May it be so for this church and for each one of us. **Amen.**

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¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Matthew 16:13-20: Pastoral Perspective by Jim S. Kim, p. 380.

² *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, p. 382-383.

³ Romans 12:3-8

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Matthew 16:13-20: Theological Perspective* by Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, p. 384.

⁵ Ferguson, Ralph. *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*. Wild Goose Publications, p. 95