

**August 23, 2020**

**21st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Year A**

**“The Great Promise”**

**Again Jesus decides to withdraw, the end was drawing near, and he needed time alone with his disciples that he could gain. He had so much to say to them and so much to teach them, although there were many things which then they could not bear and should not understand.**

**Confronting Jesus at this time was one pressing and demanding problem that would not go away. His time was short; his days were numbered. The problem was – was there anyone who understood him? Was there anyone who had recognized him for who and what he was? Were there any who, when he departed from the world, would carry on his work and labor for his kingdom?**

**This was a crucial problem, for it involved the very survival of the Christian faith. If there were none who had grasped the truth, or even glimpsed it, then all his work was undone; if there were just a few who realized the truth, his work was safe. So Jesus was determined to put all to the test and ask his followers who they believed him to be.**

**Here, we have a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with twelve ordinary men around him. At that moment, the Pharisees and the Sadducees are plotting and planning to destroy him as a**

**dangerous heretic. He stands in an area littered with the temples of Syrian gods, in a place where the history of Israel crowded in upon people's minds. And there of all the places, this amazing carpenter stands and asks his disciples who they believe him to be. It is as if Jesus sets himself against the background of the world's religions in all their history and their splendor and demanded to be compared with them. (1)**

**So here was Jesus determined to demand a verdict from his disciples. He had to know before the trip to Jerusalem and the cross if anyone had even dimly grasped who and what he was. He didn't ask them directly, but he began by asking what people were saying about him, and who they took him to be.**

**'Some said that he was John the Baptist, others said that he was Elijah. They were saying that he was as great as the greatest of the prophets. They were also saying that Jesus was the forerunner of the Messiah.**

**Some said that Jesus was Jeremiah. Jeremiah had a curious place in the expectations of the people of Israel. It was believed that, before the people went into exile, Jeremiah had taken the ark and the altar of incense out of the Temple, and hidden them away in a lonely cave on Mount Nebo; and that, before the coming of the Messiah, he would return and produce them, and the glory of God**

would come to the people again (2 Maccabees 2:1-12). In 4 Ezra 2:18, the promise of God is: ‘I will send you help, my servants Isaiah and Jeremiah’.’ (1)

When the people identified Jesus with Elijah and with Jeremiah, they were according to their understanding, paying him a great compliment and setting him in a high place.

When Jesus had heard the verdicts of the crowd, he asked the all-important question: ‘And you – who do you say I am?’ At that question, there may have been a moment’s of silence, while each of their minds came thoughts which they were almost afraid to express in words; and then Peter made his great discovery and his great confession; and Jesus knew that his work was safe because there was at least someone who understood.

It is interesting to note that each of the three gospels has its own version of the saying of Peter. Matthew has ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.’ Mark is briefer (8:29): ‘You are the Messiah.’ And Luke is clearest of all (9:20): ‘The Messiah of God.’

Jesus knew now that there was at least someone who had recognized him for the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the Son of the living God. The word Messiah and the Christ are the same; the one is the Hebrew and the other is the Greek for the Anointed

**One. Kings were ordained to office by anointing, as they still are. The Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One is God's King over all the people.**

**It is here that Jesus gives Peter his name. Jesus says: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood has not revealed this unto you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'**

**The word rock is again and again applied to God himself. One thing is clear. To call anyone a rock was the greatest of compliments and no Jew who knew the Old Testament could ever use the phrase without thinking of God.**

**My Rock, my son Stavros. During and ever since he has been the one I turn to when there was and is a problem. At 16, when I was going through my divorce, some 24 or 25 years ago, he was always there, no matter what, no matter when and no matter why, I knew that he had my back and still does. Only thing I won't tell him what being a rock means, the kid, I still call him kid at 41, already has a big head and I don't need it any bigger.**

**It doesn't help, of course, that Simon was renamed Peter meaning 'rock.' And as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't much help now that Jesus uses such concrete words to make his point. 'Rock,'**

for instance. Or even 'build.' Because, you see, for as long as I have been serving in the church the conversation (when we even have it) isn't about the church's foundation, unless the church building's actual physical foundation is in question. Rather, for the most part we have leapt to our own too concrete understanding of 'church.' Much of the time we don't even get to foundations or sources. We just think of 'the church' as the building itself.

And so it seems to me fitting and especially important for us now to return to this and passages like it as we reflect on the nature and meaning of 'the church.' No doubt this is particularly so in these days when many do not find ourselves gathering 'inside a building' as was taken for granted not so many months ago. Indeed, perhaps it is at least a little helpful to remember that when Jesus first uttered these words to Peter, church buildings as we know them now would have been the furthest thing from his imagination.

For I know you agree with me here. In spite of the fact that for centuries, we have thought of 'the church' as 'the building,' as a physical place to which we go, we know deep down that this is not really so, cannot be so, had better not be so. The 'church' must be so much more than this if the faith we share has any hope of thriving, or perhaps even of surviving.

**Indeed, by now I have preached in a number of congregations and in every case, almost every one of them, the building was aging. Roofs have had to be replaced. Tuck pointing has had to be repaired. Basements have flooded, toilets have backed up, windows have been repaired, resurfaced, replaced and furnaces have crashed at particularly unhelpful times. Buildings break down and need constant attention. It is just a fact.**

**And perhaps as much as this, buildings are built for a particular need in a particular time and place and suddenly we turn around: And what worked as a classroom in 1960 doesn't really work even ten years later, much less sixty years. Or a kitchen which was state of the art a half a century ago is not outfitted to meet today's needs. And so, buildings are rethought, and elevators are installed, only to require more and more advanced upkeep and care.**

**And yet, we do love this understanding of 'church,' I know that we do, I know that I do. There is something about the space itself which evokes often warm memories. We can step inside and hear the echoes of the pipe organ (or other instruments) and choirs and congregational singing, even now when it has been months since their music has sounded in person at least. When I happen to go to Westminster, doesn't matter for what, a sale, a dinner, a bible study, I can see my mom there. She was so much a part of that church that when I am there, there is a peace inside me. I can see her helping in**

**the kitchen or serving the food, I can feel her spirit inside me filling me with love and joy.**

**We love our buildings. They become infused with ‘the holy’ for us. Sometimes it is tied up with all the important events of one’s life as was at least partly the case in the story I offer here. And often it is something more. Something perhaps harder to pin down. Something to do with the moving of the Spirit resulting in the growth of one’s faith that gets associated with a particular space that we remember as ‘church.’**

**Rev. Janet Hunt writes in her commentary: “And so, it is, as I am writing now, I am taken back decades to the first ‘church’ which shaped, or perhaps more accurately, who shaped me in my faith.**

**This is how it was:**

**I grew up in a mission congregation. And objectively speaking, that church’s first building was entirely functional, yes, but it was not exactly beautiful:**

**Even so, I remember it as rich and good and full. Yes, even beautiful — no doubt made so by the lively faith of those gathered week after week.**

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**Thankfully, by honoring and transforming the 'old' in this way, it did exactly what they had hoped and more. Pretty soon this long-time member found her way into the new pews in the new worship space. But even more than this, it seems to me. All together they found a way to demonstrate the truth that the church is not found in any one physical space, that our faith is not confined to or represented by any one piece of worship furnishing — no matter how beautiful. Or not. Rather it is something that lives in each of us, carried by each of us into the world. Like those pieces of the old altar. Like those small crosses. Indeed, like Peter professed so long ago.” (2)**

**For this we know, don't we? That any physical building not filled by those animated by the confession of faith which Peter offers now is downright void of anything that matters.**

**And that confession of faith is always alive, and it always lives in those who carry it in our hearts and live it in our lives:**

**“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

**As much as we love our buildings, and yes as convenient as they are as gathering places for God's people, these are not actually the 'church' itself. Indeed, 'the church' is built on the hearts, the lives, the living confession of those who have been claimed and named by Jesus. Which has nothing to do finally with brick and mortar, wood and marble, glass, and stone, or even plywood! And just as Peter named Jesus the 'Son of the living God,' Christ's church is built on the hope and promise that you and I are also 'alive in our faith' in a way no building can ever be.**

**In some ways, in comparison, actual buildings are easy, of course. It's a whole lot simpler to measure whether a building is in good repair, whether it is functioning in ways which are still helpful. But it is not and never will be 'alive.' No, that life is only found in those who confess Jesus as the one they follow and then step by step, day by day, seek to live like this is so.**

**This is a particularly critical time, it seems to me, to be sharing in this conversation. And it is so, as the memes suggest, that the Church never closed. God's people are active in the world, caring for each other, giving to the poor, reaching out to the suffering, working for justice, and continuing to grow in faith. So then, isn't this a particularly appropriate time for us to go deep and to discern together just what it means to be a church centered on a confession**

**of faith and not only one that gathers in a building which too often becomes identical with ‘the church’ itself.**

**We need to spend this time listening to the Word and to one another, seeking to listen for God’s voice more deeply, focusing on the question of what it means to be the church now and in the future. Especially in this time of pandemic.**

**We hope to do all we can to keep to leaning into the question every day as to what God has in mind that is bigger than what we can yet imagine as we live into each new day. As the ‘church.’**

**Where have you seen such an attachment to a physical structure stand in or take over for the lively faith that Peter confesses?**

**How are you navigating this time of wondering about the nature, the meaning, the purpose of ‘the church?’**

**How are you finding ways to deepen the faith/confession — both your own and that of others, in a time when perhaps you also cannot be ‘together in one place’ as you once were?**

**Is this a time of opportunity to better learn to live what Peter confessed and Jesus commended so long ago?**

***Pastor Karen***

- (1) The Gospel of Matthew – Professor Barkley**
- (2) Dancing with the Word – Rev. Janet Hunt**