

“On This Rock”

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Matthew 16:13–20 (NRSVUE)

13 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." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer
Amen

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples.

Why does he ask that? Jesus has just miraculously fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. Earlier the Pharisees and Sadducees have insisted that all of Jesus' miracles have been performed on the authority of Beelzebul, king of the demons. And now, directly before our passage, they have asked Jesus for a sign from HEAVEN—as if all the OTHER signs, including the one they have presumably just seen or heard about, were from the devil—and not to

be trusted—as if nourishment for body and soul were never to be trusted. As if anything good and nurturing were never to be trusted.

Invoking the weather, Jesus responds, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” Your vision is clouded—your ears are clogged up. Your salvation is right in front of you—and all you can see are demons. All you can see is your own fear—your own despair bouncing back at you. Talking to his disciples, Jesus says, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Their teaching is not wisdom. Their bread will not rise.

Jesus’ question then, “Who do YOU say that I am?” addressed to his disciples, those who have been in relationship with Jesus, takes on a deeper relevance. Simon Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus’ response is instructive. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.” The penetrating clarity of faith, existential trust, comes not from flesh and blood, but from Jesus’ Father in heaven. Sometimes, our perspectives can become so warped that we can no longer trust our own understanding of what is real. We can sometimes find ourselves trapped in a funhouse hall of mirrors—and in need of someone to show us the way out.

Matthew makes a point of specifying a particular location where this encounter is taking place: Caesarea Philippi. Why is that significant? Because Caesarea—as in Caesar—Philippi is the site of a temple that Herod the Great, Rome’s puppet king of Judea, built for the worship of Caesar Augustus—who upon being made the first emperor of Rome gave himself the new title of Divi Filius—which in Latin means “Son of God.” So in context, Peter calling Jesus the Son of the Living God, is making a strong and dangerous counterclaim to the emperor’s claim of ultimate authority.

The implication here is that Jesus seems to be saying that Caesar’s claim—the claim of “might makes right,” distorts everything around it. The Pharisees and Sadducees are responsible for the welfare of the people. With armed Roman soldiers in every public space, eruptions of violence are an ever-present threat. They live in a state of constant alert and alarm. Everyday they must make decisions that compromise their integrity. They have internalized the threat. They cannot afford hope. Their very sense of reality has become warped in the distorted gravity of Rome’s might.

Absolute power in the hands of human beings corrupts absolutely—and not only the souls of the oppressors, but also the souls of the oppressed. They are trapped in the hall of mirrors of our worst human impulses.

“Who do YOU say that I am,” Jesus asks his disciples. “You are the Son of the Living God,” Simon Peter responds. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” Jesus says “...I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock [“rock” in Greek is “petros”] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

Just as Jesus’ authority to heal and perform miracles comes, not from the king of the demons, but from the one Jesus calls “the Father,” so, too, Peter’s

recognition of the presence of “the Father” in Jesus. Ultimate authority comes from neither Beelzebul nor Caesar—but from God. And this authority, Jesus, the living Son of God, gives to the church. “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 have already been loosed in heaven.”

Now let’s pause here a moment. The Greek grammar here makes this passage difficult to translate. Accordingly, our English version has been simplified. The meaning is not so much that we can make up our own arbitrary rules—and heaven is bound to go along with those rules—as if the church itself, has absolute power. Rather, the passage reads something closer to “Whatever you bind on earth will have already been bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will have already been loosed in heaven.” The implication is that just as the one Jesus calls “the Father” reveals Jesus’ true identity to believers, that same one chooses to work through believers—through you and me.

We have the authority to build up the kingdom and tear down the walls of hostility separating one from another. And we have the power to call out the distortions of Caesar—of “might makes right”—of the lies that everything must be reduced to the common denominator, that all of us are only the sum of our worst impulses. We have the power to hope and in hoping see the light that shines in the darkness.

Friends, it is only the one who lies all the time who needs to believe that EVERYONE lies all the time. It is only the one who cheats all the time who needs to believe that he is always being cheated. We have the authority to bear witness to the goodness in ourselves and in one another, rooted in the very image of God in which we were all created and which is being restored in Jesus Christ, the Living Son of God.

Which is to say, if the church has any authority at all, it is moral authority—and that this moral authority comes not so much as a claim of extraordinary virtue as a conviction that truth requires transcendence—that it cannot be reduced to our own individual interests or fears and prejudices, but must include the welfare of the whole—which means we must learn to look beyond our own noses—we must lift up our eyes—we must open our ears—and listen for something other than the sound of our own voices. Truth requires relationship and humility. We are receivers searching the airwaves, seeking together a signal broadcasting from beyond ourselves.

At the end of the day it is Peter’s connection to the one Jesus called “the Father” which is the true rock on which the church’s moral authority rests. Peter’s testimony. His witness. His life in relationship with the Divine Other—his source and the source of all that is, the font of sacrificial love, agape love, love victorious over death and our lesser angels.

As the church, we must be vigilant. We must ground our authority in humility. The temptation to claim the power of Caesar, if even by analogy, is always close when human beings take on the responsibility of power.

Friends, we live in a time when the power of Caesar is momentarily ascendant. When those in power model the delusion that they alone can solve all problems, that they can never fail, that it is always somebody else's fault, that any difference must be eradicated, that every question must be squelched. They cannot bear scrutiny, or anyone else's autonomy. They do not know the meaning of love and so must destroy everything that cannot be swallowed.

But WE have been given the authority on earth of love, itself—love that seeks the good of all—love that propels us beyond our own narrow self-interests—and THAT will set us free. THAT is Truth. THAT will distinguish between signal and noise. Let us make our stand on THIS rock. Amen.