

**Living Stones©****1 Peter 2:1-10; Matthew 16:13-23****March 31, 2019****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

Today we are in the fourth Sunday of the Lenten journey. We only have one more Sunday before Palm Sunday and then we enter Holy Week. Time flies – all the time.

Our study on Simon Peter takes us to an interesting scenario. First, it is very intriguing that Jesus would take his disciples on this two-day journey by foot to this location in Caesarea Philippi. It is 25 miles out of the way from where they tend to travel; it is not a place where Jewish people hang out much; in fact, it is a place where pagans worship the Greek god named Pan, a god of nature and wildlife. Pan was a god that looked like a goat at his bottom half but a man on the top.

There also was a temple built by King Herod the Great, dedicated to Augustus Caesar because he had bestowed another country to Herod. In the video we saw during our bible study, Adam Hamilton – the author of our study – was at the ruins of Caesarea Philippi, and we saw the indentation in the rocks where there had been statues of carved gods.

Why in the world would Jesus want to purposely go out of his way to take his disciples to this place in order to have this particular conversation?

But here they are. The disciples must have been looking around, perhaps nervously wondering what Jesus had in mind, when He asked this question:

“Who do people say I am?”

“Well,” some of them said, “some people say you are the great prophet Elijah who had come back.”

“Some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead.

And they named several of the prophets of old.

And then Jesus looked them. I can imagine his deep, thoughtful look. And he asked:

But who do you say I am?”

Maybe they thought it was a trick question. Maybe they just didn’t know. Or maybe they thought they knew but didn’t want to look stupid if that turned to be wrong.

So, they were silent. Or maybe some of them were saying ... “Hmmm. I should know this. Its right on the tip of my tongue.

I think they were just not sure what to think. So, they kept quiet. Except for one. And that one was Simon Peter. He spoke up boldly, once again stepping out in faith, and said, ‘You are the Christ. The Son of the living God.’”

The Greek word for Christ is *Christos*, which is the same word for *Messiah*, which is Hebrew. They both mean “the anointed one.” All the kings and priests of the Old Testament were anointed with oil – set apart for serving God. Even special objects used in the temple were anointed with oil for service to Yahweh – or God.

So, to confess that Jesus was the long-awaited promised Messiah, meant he was the one they expected to be anointed as king – but a king who would be strong and finally overthrow the Romans and rule over the Israelites (or Jews) again. Like King David did.

And here was Simon making this statement of faith, saying that Jesus was the long-awaited Christ or Messiah. The one who would finally conquer and rule over the land.

And Jesus praised him for his confession saying, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of John because no one but God has let you see you this truth.” And then again, as he did the first time, he met him, Jesus calls Simon “Peter.” The Aramaic name is *Kephas*, or in Greek it is *Petros*. Whichever he used, Jesus was saying his name is *Rock*.

And Jesus says “on this Rock I will build my church. Not even the gates of hell can stand against it.”

Adam Hamilton interprets this to mean that when the church is doing what Christ calls her to do – to be actively engaged in the world, even the gates of hell cannot long prevail. The Church wins. Christ wins. Love wins against hatred. Good wins against evil.

Jesus tells Peter “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven and anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.”

Jesus is giving great authority to Peter – authority to interpret Scripture and to practice church discipline. Peter is given the keys to heaven and the authority to make decisions. And Peter – the Rock that Jesus built his Church on became the first pope of the Catholic Church.

Of course, Peter, as bold as he was to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, didn’t quite understand who that Christ actually would be. Because right after that conversation, Jesus began telling the disciples about how he would suffer and die and rise again. Of course, it is hard to hear the last part about his rising from the dead when they had not experienced that yet. All they could hear was the terrible prophecy that Jesus would suffer and die.

And Peter went off on Jesus. “No! That cannot happen. That will not happen to you!”

And Jesus’ words in response to Peter were strong, much like in the 40 days of temptation with the devil in the wilderness when Satan tried to break Jesus at his weakest moment.

Jesus, in fact, called Peter “Satan.” The tempter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

Can you imagine how Peter felt? Just a minute ago Jesus was praising him and now he's calling him Satan!

But Peter, like everyone else, expected a different Messiah. They did not ever dream that the Messiah would be one who would sacrifice his life by dying a horrible death. They could not understand how that weakness could mean power.

But of course it did. And it was the only way Jesus could actually, once and for all, overcome sin and death for the world. Eventually they understood it but not until after he died and was resurrected.

So, we have all this symbolism with rocks and stones. Peter – the rock that Jesus uses to build his church on. Peter – the flawed but faithful disciple.

And yet, in that moment when Jesus rebukes him, he calls Peter a stone would cause Jesus to stumble if he were to yield to the temptation to not go through with the suffering and death.

Later, after Jesus had died and risen, after he ascended to heaven and Peter was one of the leading people in building the church for Christ, he wrote to the congregations of the new little churches in Asia Minor – a letter that was probably passed from one church to another – telling them that they (and we too) are living stones. We are stones that God is using to build a spiritual temple.

I guess you could say we are a “chip off the Old Block” – little stones from Christ, the cornerstone of the church. And Peter was the first one. But notice how he says God is using us – living stones – to build a “spiritual temple.”

We church people – especially those of us who have been in one church for quite a while – tend to get attached to our buildings and to our traditional ways of “being church.”

But the church is so much more than a building or tradition; more than the liturgy, the doxology, the things we are used to. If the building burned down and there was nothing left besides the people we would still be the church. Because the church is us – faithful believers who are actively showing Christ to the world; fulfilling Christ's mission. Gathering wherever we can to be in fellowship and worship God; celebrating our risen Lord.

It's the faithful believers who are the Church and whom the gates of hell cannot ever prevail against.

Adam Hamilton says this in his book: “We want our religion to bless us but we prefer it not ask anything too hard of us in return. We don't like self-denial; we'd prefer to have a convenient faith that doesn't demand too much sacrifice on our part. (He was actually saying that about himself).

Often our faith does provide blessings and joy, goodness and mercy. ... but if our faith is authentically Christian, it will lead us to give and live sacrificially, to yield our ego, to seek to

live a life of servanthood, to serve others, and at times, to make decisions we don't want to make in answer to Christ's call.

The point is not pain and sacrifice for the sake of pain and sacrifice. During the conversation with Peter and the other disciples, Jesus went on to say, "All who want to save their lives will lose them and all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives?" (Matthew 16:25-26)

Jesus is saying that the life we long for that is true fulfillment is found in self-denial, in sacrifice and in loving and serving God and others.

We are the Church – we are living stones – we are like Peter in many ways – flawed, yet faithful. We continue to be the spiritual temple of the Lord.

May we be faithful as we strive to follow him. Amen.

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