

Sermon: Living Stones
Text: Matthew 16:13-20 NLT
God's Word: 1 Peter 2:4-10 NLT
Date: Sunday, August 27, 2023
Preacher: Rev. Becky Stephens

Matthew 16:13-20 NLT

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." ¹⁵ Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. ¹⁸ Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. ¹⁹ And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven." ²⁰ Then he sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

~~~~~

You've heard the jokes, someone dies and they meet Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. In these jokes, Peter is the one who decides whether or not a person or persons will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Why Peter?

It is from our Gospel Lesson for this morning that the image of Peter as the "pearly gatekeeper" who says "yea" or "nay" to persons trying to enter heaven comes from. It is from this Gospel Lesson that we get the image of Peter as the "keeper of the keys" to the Kingdom.

But the "keeper of the keys" refers to the authoritative teaching office of the Church, not decisions about who enters heaven. Those decisions are left to Christ alone. And the hinge on which that decision rests is on Peter's confession in this passage of Scripture...not on Peter himself.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked His disciples. "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'"

What is Christ saying here? Peter gave the correct answer...the profession of faith, shall we say. And Peter did not come up with this profession of faith through his own volition. It was not revealed to him by flesh and blood, but by God the Father!!! God gave Peter the ability to see the truth. God gave Peter the ability to accept the truth. God gave Peter the ability to profess the truth! It is only through God's grace that Peter possessed the truth...the "rock of confession of faith in Jesus Christ" upon which Jesus Christ's Church is built!

The church is not built on Peter. The church is built on Christ, the Son of the living God, and those who are given this knowledge by grace from God, and confess it are a part of Christ's Church! On the rock of the Christian profession of faith that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God,"

Jesus has built His Church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome the power of this confession, of this faith! "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

The confession that Peter made is the central faith of the Church. It is the faith that saves us. It is the faith that causes us to be members of Christ's Holy Church!

"I believe...in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord." I BELIEVE. This is not just some intellectual affirmation, but a soul-trust for time and eternity. Christ is the center, the storm center and the power center: Christ is Christianity!!!

Nothing on earth can reveal this truth and make it known in our hearts. The only way we come to know this truth is through the grace of God Who comes after us, Who is the Light of the World, the Word made Flesh, "the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

The lights of the earth cannot completely reveal to us, say the Lake Erie on a dark night, but a flash of lightning can. In an instant, a flash of lightning can make the darkest of the night as light as day!

In the same way, the flash from God Himself is needed in order for us to see the truth which can set us free. A flash from God, and an answering flash in our souls.

Do we see the flash? Do we trust its truth? Do we confess the Deity of Christ? It is upon this confession that Christ builds Christ's Church!

In God's Word that was read earlier Peter tells us that Christ is the "living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God..." and we, "like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood. You are a chosen people," Peter tells us, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

It should not be surprising that it is Peter who later tells us that Jesus is building His Church upon the rocklike confession of faith in Him as the Son of the Living God. No doubt, we, who were once nothing—are made into children of God through faith in Jesus Christ! Through faith in Christ we go from "the pig sty to the royal palace," from "rags to riches."

All the various religions of the world have built their temples. There are many magnificent structures. But what religion can make the most magnificent structure...not from rock and mortar, but from a temple of living persons...that is what Christ's Church is.

The temple in Jerusalem may lie in dust, but the 'spiritual house' of the living Christ continually attracts to itself persons who allow themselves to be built into the living walls of Christ's increasing and growing city!!! "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood..."

That's us...you and me...all who confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God! We are a "spiritual house" ...We are a "holy priesthood." And this, my fellow servants of Christ, is a BIG responsibility indeed!!!

The terms that Peter uses to describe all members of Christ's Church make no distinction between the laity and the clergy. We are all called to this "new life." We are all destined to reveal and fulfill the purposes of God for the entire human race! The whole Church, all who believe, are commissioned by Christ to be the witnesses for Christ to the world!

What does Jesus tell us in Matthew Chapter 5? "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Through our corporate testimony and the testimony of every one of us individually, we are to witness to the truth of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the Living God! We, “living stones” built into Christ’s “spiritual house” are called to take the Gospel, the Good News, the confession of faith...the only confession through which any person can be saved...into our homes, our places of work, our schools, our community, our dying world!!! Through our worship, our witness, our loving service we are all called to bring the saving news of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ to “the captives,” ... to those who “sit in great darkness.”

We are to be joined with our Great High Priest, Jesus the Christ, Who served God and humankind so perfectly and so completely all the way to the Cross of Calvary! Are we doing this? Is this our desire?

A colleague of mine asked me if I thought the Church—meaning the institution itself—cares about saving souls. “Or,” he inquired, “are we just rearranging chairs on the titanic?” We talked about that for a while.

What is most important? Desperately trying to hold onto the members we have, satiating the masses by “going with the flow,” in order to keep the institution afloat...or standing up for what is right in the face of opposition, persecution, and possible death?

My friend looked at me and said solemnly, “Those who try to save their lives will lose it, but those who lose their lives will find it.”

We have a big responsibility...all of us!!! We are not called to waste our time rearranging the chairs on the titanic! We are called to be “living stones” who serve, worship, confess and profess to a dying world the Good News about the Living Christ!!! We are to follow Christ, as the disciples learned to follow Christ, which means there is great risk and great cost involved!

But in this following, in this risk-taking adventure, we find the power of Christ Who holds us, whether we are living or dying, and gives us the promise of eternal life!!! As Christ’s followers we are to find true freedom in knowing that we are God’s own possession, God’s peculiar treasure, God’s favorite objects of God’s affection!

God’s relationship to the Church, to you and to me, is as intimate as that of a married couple. And God calls us to be a glorious bride who will be presented to

Him in splendor... “as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

Is this who we are? Is this who we are becoming? It is an awesomely BIG Responsibility, but it is also the most privileged position anyone could ever hope for!!!

May we commit fully to God’s Word, to being God’s Church, to being God’s Royal Priesthood, God’s Holy Nation, God’s Chosen People, “that we may declare the praises of him who called” ...us... “out of darkness into his wonderful light.”  
Amen.