

**Holiday Island Presbyterian Church
Which Rock?
Matthew 16:13-20
August 27, 2017**

INTRODUCTION:

And now we turn our attention to one of those Biblical passages that has caused a library full of arguments over the exact meaning of the passage and its application to the Christian community.

It seems so simple:

“Peter, who do you think I am?”

“Upon this rock I shall build my Church.”

Let’s take a deeper look.

THE PLACE:

First of all,

**in our haste to get to the heart of the passage,
we skip right past the geographical setting.**

The significance of this setting -

- the district of Caesarea Philippi -

has been clouded and obscured through the ages.

**There is an older significance to the place
that is both religious and pagan.**

**It is in the very shadow of a Caesar temple
and is associated with both Jewish and pagan revelations.**

**It would be interesting to research this thoroughly,
but it is beyond the scope of this morning.**

IDENTIFYING JESUS:

**Jesus has gathered His disciples
and is conducting a survey -**

“Who do the people say that I am?”

**Even though the people were using terms and titles for Jesus
that suggested he was a transcendent being -**

- someone set apart from ordinary human beings -**
- there was not yet a full realization
of what it meant to see him as THE messiah.**

Some thought He was John come back from the dead.

**Some thought He was the forerunner of the Messiah
so they thought he was maybe the prophet Elijah.**

**In his gospel, Matthew includes Jeremiah,
the first of the latter prophets in the Jewish scriptures.**

- Maybe because He was hounded by those who opposed Him -**
- Or He was considered a prophet of doom like Jeremiah.**

**There was a substantial amount of confusion
over the exact nature of Jesus**

And no group was openly confessing Jesus as the Messiah.

And at this point,

Jesus turns to Peter and asks:

“Who do you say that I am?”

And this is where the controversy begins.

**When Jesus says to Peter “Who do *YOU* say that I am?”
the word “you” is a plural word.**

Remember a couple of weeks back,

I said the disciples were all good ole East Texas boys?

Well, in the language of East Texas “ya’ll” is a singular word; the plural of “ya’ll” is “all ya’ll.”

Jesus is therefore asking:

“Who do all ya’ll say that I am?”

It is not addressed to Peter exclusively!

Peter’s answer, therefore, is on behalf of all the disciples.

Peter speaks for them all.

It was probably the first time

Peter was confronted with the question.

“Come, Peter, it is time to make a decision.”

“Are you in or out?”

**That time comes in the lives of everyone
who comes in contact with the gospel.**

God draws us through the Holy Spirit -

- the gospel is presented to us -

**- and sooner or later we have to answer that question
for ourselves.**

Who *is* this Jesus?

I like C.S. Lewis’ quote in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.”

Indeed, speaking for himself and the other disciples,

Peter boldly answers:

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

THE ROCK:

And then Jesus says the one phrase that has split denominations:

“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.”

OK, so I dug out my *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to find out what the Greek rendition of “rock” might be.

In secular Greek,

the word is *petra*

and it means the hard thing we normally call rock.

Those things that seem to grow in your yard around here.

Figuratively, it suggests firmness, immovability.

What I didn't know - or had forgotten -

- is that in the mythical imagery of the area

in which Jesus lived and preached,

the earth is said to have risen out of the sea

like a rock or a temple.

In Judaism,

the rock is the holy of holies,

the center of the earth,

the stone that stops the primal flood, the gate of paradise.

Strictly speaking, then, only Christ is *petra*,

Peter is *petra* only because he has accepted Jesus as Christ

and Christ has adopted him;

called him into the body of Christ.

There are two camps concerning the role of Peter in this passage:

**The first camp sees this passage as confirming
that Peter is some sort of super rabbi;
somehow elevated above the rest because of this confession.
Especially favored by Jesus
and granted the exclusive right to found His church.**

**In my humble - yet accurate - opinion,
that interpretation is too narrow and too exclusive
and it overlooks the plural “you”
to whom Jesus addressed His question.**

**I favor the second camp,
those who consider Peter to be a typical disciple,
representative of all the other disciples
and therefore representative of all believers.
Peter is simply first among equals.**

**Thus what Jesus said to Peter is a message for all followers of Jesus.
And that message is for you . . . and me . . .**

CHURCH:

That brings us to the word: “Church.”

**I pulled every commentary I own off the shelf
to track down this word “church.”**

**For the life of me,
I couldn't see Jesus using that word!
I'm pretty sure it had not been invented yet.**

So what was Jesus saying?

The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* and does not mean what we have come to know as “church.”

And we have re-defined it into more modern terms than was actually meant by what Jesus said.

***Ekklesia* is far bigger and far more important than “church” - unless you use the word as a substitute for the “church universal” - the “catholic” church - all of God’s people redeemed by Christ.**

The “church” that Jesus said would be built would be those followers who have the eyes of faith to see the new revelation; people who come to see themselves as people of the new covenant established by Jesus.

It could *never* refer to an institution, an organization or a form of worship.

If you follow that line of reasoning, then it is clear that what Jesus was asking Peter - “Who do you say I am?” is the question Jesus asks every one of us.

**And when we can say - truthfully and faithfully say -
- You are the Christ, Son of the Living God -
- then we are included in the *ekklesia* of kindred believers.**

**The disciples - the first believers -
are the ones Jesus trusted to establish His *people* -
- to include them in the New Covenant He was establishing.**

**And that work could not go forward
until the disciples grasped - and were grasped by -
- the full comprehension of Jesus as the Christ.**

**All this passage is saying, then,
is what the rest of the New Testament affirms,
that Christ established His Church on the faith of the apostles.**

**It would be their teaching,
their writing of the Scriptures,
their establishing and organizing the people,
into what we now know as the Church.**

**The Church is the “called out” body of believers,
those who have been called by God - the elect -
Christian congregations of people redeemed by Christ.**

**This is something brand new -
- not a continuation of the old assemblies.**

**Because the Church is a form of the kingdom,
nothing can prevent it from realizing its full potential.
And so the gates of Hades cannot prevail over it.**

**Oh, we can slow the progress of a particular church,
we can block the path an individual Church is following,
we can circumvent God’s will for a particular church -
- but we cannot prevail against God’s Church.**

CONCLUSION:

**The ultimate meaning of this passage
is that it is not Peter who builds the Church, but Jesus.**

And the church is not built solely upon Peter’s confession,

it is built on the confession of all believers.

What makes the church a “church” is not the elders or the session,
not the pastor, not the music,
not the worship service.

It is the body of believers,
gathered together where
“the Word of God is truly preached and heard,
the Sacraments are rightly administered,
and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.
According to the Scots Confession.

So, let me leave you with a couple of challenges:

If you have not joined this body of believers,
I would invite you to do so.
I can meet with you anytime that is convenient with you
and discuss with you the process and meaning
of membership in this church.

If you are a member of this church,
then you are called into a body of believers -
- charged with the responsibility
of not only preserving this church
but also seeing that the gospel is preached to the lost
and that we spread the good news to our neighbors.

If you believe, as I do,
that when Jesus asked Peter:
“Who do you say that I am?”
Jesus was also asking us the same question!

So . . . who do you say Jesus is?

Would you say a great teacher?

Perhaps even a prophet?

You may use terms like “messiah” and “Christ.”

But . . . do you truly believe

that Jesus is the Christ, Son of the Living God?