

August 21, 2011

Pentecost - Lectionary 21

Color: Green

### Introduction

In Isaiah the people are bid to look to their spiritual ancestors as the rock from which they were hewn. Jesus declares that the church will be built on the rock of Peter's bold confession of faith. God's word of reconciliation and mercy are keys to the church's mission. Paul urges us to not be conformed to this world, but to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, using our individual gifts to build up the body of Christ. From the table we go forth to offer our spiritual worship through word and deed.

### Prayer of the Day

O God, with all your faithful followers of every age, we praise you, the rock of our life. Be our strong foundation and form us into the body of your Son, that we may gladly minister to all the world, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

### Isaiah 51:1-6

Just as God had called Abraham and Sarah and given them many descendants, so now God offers comfort to Zion. God's deliverance will come soon and will never end.

### Romans 12:1-8

In response to God's merciful activity, we are to worship by living holistic, God-pleasing lives. Our values and viewpoints are not molded by this age, but are transformed by the Spirit's renewing work. God's grace empowers different forms of service among Christians, but all forms of ministry function to build up the body of Christ.

### Matthew 16:13-20

At a climactic point in Jesus' ministry, God reveals to Peter that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," and Jesus responds with the promise of a church that will overcome the very gates of Hades.

Sermon: Foundation Stones!

Hymn of the Day: ELW 796 How Firm a Foundation

### Theological Insights:

- Peter's "you are the Messiah" is a confession of faith
- God/Jesus is the "rock", Peter is the first stone laid on the foundation. All people of faith since Peter are additional "rocks" in building the church - the community of believers.

### For those who have never heard:

- God is molding us/our material for his purpose

### What's in it for us?

- We are all formed differently and differ from our ancestors, but we rely on Christ as our "firm foundation."

Image for projection: →

### The Sermon:

Irving Stone's classic, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, is a biographical novel about the life of the famous Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo. Most of us have heard of Michelangelo and may have seen his David, the Pietà, the Sistine Chapel or any number of his famous works of art.

Although not an avid reader, it seemed prudent to have a book with me while traveling in the early 1970s . . . so *The Agony and the Ecstasy* was my choice. As I read this book, I was enthralled by the passion



Michelangelo had for his work. I was mesmerized when I read how Michelangelo wanted to sculpt persons in his works of art so realistically, he would sneak into the morgues late at night to study the muscular development in the cadavers.

Michelangelo himself once said, "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." Michelangelo had great respect for the integrity of his materials, and he had great vision for what his material would eventually become. Artists like Michelangelo touch our souls with their exquisite work, with their creations that are great masterpieces.

We might wonder . . . how does Jesus see and understand our "material?" We are like a block of marble and God's is the sculptor whose chisel hews away our rough edges to constantly form and shape and mold our faith throughout our life. God knows each one of us and God knows what He created us for. We only need to remain pliable . . . trusting in God the sculptor to create in us what best serves God. And like Peter, the "always messing up in some way Peter," we are changed by God's sculpting hand.

When Jesus called Peter to discipleship, Peter was a rough, ordinary fisherman. All of Jesus' disciples were ordinary men. In today's gospel story, Jesus finds time to be alone with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, a mainly non-Jewish area north-east of the Sea of Galilee and filled with many reminders of the numerous ancient Greek gods and the worship of Roman emperors. In this very unlikely setting, a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter, with 12 very ordinary men around him, first asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" In their answers, the disciples pay high tribute to Jesus when they say he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah because to the people in Jesus' day, these 3 men would have been considered forerunners to the coming of the Messiah.

Then Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Now Jesus is never wishy-washy and when he asks a question, he expects an answer. After all, Jesus knows that soon he will go to Jerusalem and go to the cross and he wonders . . . do any of these men get it? Is there anyone who understands him? Does anyone recognize him for *who* and *what* he is? Is there anyone who, when Jesus is gone from the flesh, will carry on with his work for the kingdom?

Then Peter makes his great discovery and his great confession when he boldly says "You are the Messiah - the Son of the living God." Peter gets it, and Jesus knows that there is someone who understands! There is someone to carry the message forward . . . so Jesus knows that Christian believers will grow.

Yes, Peter was the first man to make the leap of faith and see in Jesus the Son of the living God. And after Peter makes his bold confession, Jesus calls his name and gives him his vocation . . . his calling. Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church." Now we know that the rock of the church is God . . . the rock of the Church is Jesus. But when Jesus says "on you I will build my church", it is as if Jesus is saying "Peter, you are the first man to grasp who I am; your faith is therefore the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the church which I am founding."

Peter is now the means of opening the door to God for thousands of people in the days to come. Peter speaks on Pentecost and 3,000 are converted to Christianity. Peter - the simple fisherman who kept messing up so many times - is sculpted to lead many to Christ and to become a leader in the church in Jerusalem.

But it is not only Peter. All of us, like all believers before us, are to also open the doors of the kingdom so others can enter into the promises of Christ . . . the promises of love, peace and justice for all.

The ELCA Churchwide Assembly took place in Orlando this past week. As you entered the Convention Center, a huge banner hung in the lobby which read *Freed in Christ to Serve*. That was the theme for the 1,025 voting members plus hundreds more as visitors, staff, and guests from across the nation and beyond attended.

The Assembly is the largest legislative body of the ELCA - the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. So yes . . . we had long plenary sessions every day filled with motions and amendments. However, we also had daily

worship with Holy Communion, daily small group Bible study, prayer before every major vote, several special presentations on various missions of the ELCA, and lots of networking with each other. I mention the Assembly today because this assembly, representing the ELCA's 10,000 congregations and 4 million members, gathered to celebrate the theme *Freed in Christ to Serve*. We know that the church is not a building, it is the believing people. So let's take a look at who we are as part of this church named Lutheran:

#### We are a reforming church

In 2017 we will celebrate our 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary as Lutherans. Martin Luther was the first successful reformer and as Lutherans we continue to be a reforming church. We continually ask "what does it mean to follow the resurrected Christ."

Yes, we cherish a very deep and meaningful heritage. However, our twittering, social networking, internet connected, I-pad filled world is shrinking rapidly! More than ever before, we reach out in mission - loving our neighbor here in our country and around the world. We find our changing world exciting and full of hope!

In congregations like Apostles, it is *God's Work, Our Hands* as we reach out in so many ways to help others. When we go out in mission to be God's hands in this world we form the foundation for each other's faith.

The ELCA is also present when disaster strikes in this country - the floods in North Dakota and the tornado that leveled such a large area in Joplin, Missouri, are examples. The Lutherans are there to help them personally and financially. Over and over again we heard people say, "and the Lutherans don't leave until they are finished!"

The ELCA is very much present in Haiti, Japan, South America, Central America, Africa and China - spreading the Good News, making great strides to fight malaria, poverty, world hunger, drought and to teach people how to purify their water so they have clean water to drink. We are called to do justice, to share what we have to help others in their need.

We are evangelical - which means we are rooted in the gospel, the Good News! It is the core of who we are. There are children, youth, young adults and older adults in our country and around the world who have never heard that God's love is so great for all of us, that he gave us the gift of forgiveness and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are committed to bring the Good News to those who have never heard.

We are an Easter people - we are always centered in the resurrected Christ. We welcome ALL people because God's Grace is given to ALL. And as we welcome all people, we celebrate our differences and rejoice that we are joined by one God. We know who we are - we belong to Christ.

We are challenged not to rest in our "comfort zones" but to trust that the Holy Spirit will move us to mission, to seek justice and to open ourselves to all.

Why do I mention these things? Because in the centuries since Peter, every person who makes the same discovery as Peter did - that Jesus is the Messiah, our Savior - is another stone added to foundation for the building of Christ's Church. God uses people like Peter and you and me to build Christ's Church. God has his chisel in hand, shaping us to become stronger in our faith, that faith which is a gift from God. When our hearts say "I believe" it is life changing because then we become that disciple who, like Peter, comes to love our neighbor because of our love for God, our love for Jesus.

It is on the faith of every member of the body of Christ - on all of us stones who are called to be in relationship with God, that the foundation of Christ's Church is built. Please close your eyes and take a deep breath . . . now in your imagination see Jesus standing in front of you - looking directly into your eyes. Hear Jesus say your name and then hear Jesus say, "But who do you say that I am?"

Amen.