

## Sermon for August 23, 2020 by Kirsten Sloan

May the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you Lord God.

On this rock I will build my church.

Jesus had been quizzing the apostles – what were people saying - who did they think Jesus was? Most of the apostles took the questions at face value and repeated what they were hearing - some are saying John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

But when Jesus asked his apostles – who do **you** think I am - it was Peter who answered that Jesus was the Messiah.

Peter was the only apostle to get it right. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah”, Jesus said to him. “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Jesus was affirming that the source of Peter’s answer wasn’t a physical manifestation that enabled Peter to recognize Jesus as the son of God. In answering the question posed by Jesus, Peter discerned the will of God.

And for that correct answer Peter got an incredible reward. Jesus reveals to Peter the rock on which he will build his church.

Now here’s where it gets a little messy. Readers of this passage have tended to fall into two camps – the first camp believes that Jesus was saying that Peter the man was the

rock on which the church was to be built. That's because the name Peter or petras also means rock or stone.

In fact, it is the belief of the Catholic church that Peter was essentially the first pope from which the modern papacy can be traced back.

The second camp argues that what Jesus really meant was that the truth that he was the messiah was the rock or foundation on which the church would be built.

This second interpretation – that the rock is the foundation on which our church – our faith – is based, seems particularly meaningful to our current condition. This foundation of faith is what guides each of us individually and is also the foundation on which Christ Church stands.

And that foundation has been particularly important during the past 18 months. During this time, we as a church body

have been through a number of challenges. We have been searching for a new rector – someone to guide us as we move forward into the next phase of our church life. Changes like this are not easy and it’s been a little unsettling during this period of discernment.

Then came the double-punch challenges of 2020 – first the COVID-19 pandemic and then our nation erupting over the horrendous deaths of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor and the many years of social injustice experienced by too many of our brothers and sisters.

During a 1992 speech marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her succession to the throne Queen Elizabeth remarked that it had not been a year she would look back on with undiluted pleasure – because of the fire at Windsor Castle and other troubles. In fact, she dubbed that year “annus horribilis.” 1992 had nothing on the year 2020.

The quarantine that we initially thought might last only a few weeks is now in its fifth month. Our way of worshiping has changed – at least temporarily but maybe forever. We are entering a new world that might mean fewer people using the church building and parish hall, and more of us attending services and programs on-line.

We are working from home or not working at all because of jobs that have disappeared. We are helping children learn virtually and balancing those responsibilities with our own work. And there are worries about rent, mortgage payments and how to care for family and friends. And frankly, we are all going a little stir-crazy – missing the chance to travel and engage in many of the activities we love.

We miss gathering to worship, we miss singing together, we miss the fellowship of sharing a meal or long conversations

over coffee. We are creatures who crave community – and a nice dinner out with a good glass of wine or two. But the opportunity for community and fellowship has been disrupted.

On top of this are the cries to end the systemic racism that has plagued our nation for years. The on-going protests have awakened in us the recognition that we need to re-evaluate who we are as individual Christians and as a community of God and how we can be a more inclusive church – one that fully practices radical welcome and is dedicated to standing for social justice.

Yet despite all these challenges our ability to carry on as a community of faith has been due, in large part, to that rock upon which we are built.

Friends of mine have a lovely cottage on the southern shore of Maryland. The house sits just a stone's throw from St. George creek. The trade-off for the beautiful water view is the occasional flooding from the tidal surges that happen when strong storms or hurricanes make their way up the coast. But the house is set on a strong foundation five feet above the water line. Even during the strongest storms when everything around it is in chaos the house remains firmly rooted to that foundation.

The same can be said about Christ Church. Despite the challenges we are facing – the foundation of our faith remains strong – as solid as the rock upon which it is built.

Despite quarantining and social distancing, we have continued services, our small groups, bible studies, outreach activities, and other virtual gatherings. The rock upon which we are built enables us to remain faithful.

And as we move into what will be our new reality our roles as people of faith are transforming too.

Today's other reading from Romans talks about the different roles each of us plays in the collective body of Christ.

Specifically, the gifts that grace gives us: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, and compassion.

I would add a few new gifts - the virtual teacher, the deliverer of groceries, the maker of face masks, the feeder of neighbors, the provider of virtual pastoral care, the runner of errands for those unable to leave their homes, and the supporter of those standing up for social justice - all gifts, through God's grace, which have manifested themselves in these difficult times.

Each of these new roles – like the new ways which we will find ourselves worshiping as we move forward out of this period of transition and discernment will still be firmly rooted on that foundation and truth that Jesus is the son of God and all of our belief and actions spring from this. As we move forward, one of our challenges, as individuals and a church community, is to discern God’s will in these trying times.

Timothy Simpson, Editor Emeritus of Political Theology summed it up this way – the true source of the church’s life and strength is Christ, the son of the living God. And it is in him that we find our strength, our unity and, most importantly, our future.

May it be so. Amen.

