

Lectionary 21 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 27, 2017

Matthew 16:13-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”

When I was living in Chicago, and being trained for ordained ministry, I once had to deliver someone’s paperwork to the Roman Catholic archdiocese downtown. I was given directions. And I was told by the Lutheran who sent me on this errand that I would recognize the building because it flies the flag of the Vatican. A gold and white flag with two keys. The keys mentioned in this morning’s gospel. Today’s gospel is viewed by the Roman Catholic church as the foundation of the papacy, and of the papacy’s authority.

Protestantism does not see it that way. And so one problem that we readers bring to Matthew’s gospel when we read this story is that our eyes and ears are distorted by the politics and history that have been attached for so long to this story that we cannot see read it with fresh eyes and hear it with fresh ears. Lutheran preaching and Lutheran hymns and Lutheran prayers and liturgy around this story are particularly heavy-handed and cloddish. Lutherans have poured so much gravy and ketchup on this sandwich that it’s hard to figure out what kind of sandwich is actually buried beneath all the toppings.

The oldest gospel– the first one to be written– is the short and choppy gospel according to Mark. And in Mark’s gospel, this encounter between Jesus and Peter is the climax of the story. When Matthew sat down to write, he started with Mark’s primitive gospel and added a great deal of missing material and missing detail. When bibles began to be created for the first time, Christians put Matthew’s gospel in first place– at the beginning of the New Testament– because of the very high esteem that they had for this particular book. Because this moment was the climax of the older book by Mark, it is still the climax of the more comprehensive book by Matthew.

It is the climax of the gospel because it is the moment of realization by one individual that Jesus is decisive for his life. That Jesus is, for the first time for a human being, the most important thing in his own life. And for the first time, realizing that Jesus is decisive for the history of the world. It is the climax of the gospels of Mark and Matthew because the goal and purpose of their gospels is to create that same decisive encounter for me and for you. Peter’s realization, Peter’s confession, ought to become our realization and our confession. That’s what the gospel writers–

the Church calls them the “Evangelists”— are focused upon. That’s why they wrote.

Now if someone were had asked me what was the climax of the written gospels, I would have answered— being a highly trained Lutheran— I would have said the death of Jesus on the cross. And that is the fulfillment of the story, it is the culmination. That is acknowledged in today’s gospel reading by the peculiar command of Jesus as reported by Matthew: “He sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” It’s Jesus’ way of saying “This isn’t done, this isn’t the whole picture.” But it nevertheless a decisive moment for Peter, and arguably for the others in the group.

And [furthermore] if someone had asked me about important encounters with Jesus and people, I could have named three dozen stories of Jesus making an impact on the lives of others. People whom he healed, people whom he confronted, people whom he ran into. Short Lazarus the tax collector. Nicodemus who came by night. Mary and Martha, the sisters who argued with each other about the right way to honor Jesus. All of these people were touched and transformed by Jesus. But they weren’t Peter. And what makes Peter different is the use of the word “Church.”

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Four gospel writers. Four evangelists telling the story of Jesus. Only Matthew’s gospel uses the word church. That word is never used by the others. Only by Matthew. And he only uses it twice. In today’s reading. And then in a very important reading we’ll read two weeks from today, which is a follow-up and an outgrowth of today’s story.

So what makes Peter different than those people I just mentioned— Lazarus the tax collector, Nicodemus, Mary and Martha— is that they didn’t become the church. But Peter did. THAT IS IMPORTANT. Last January, I reached the 20th anniversary of my ordination. So much of my work involves sharing Jesus with people. I can’t tell you how many hundreds of people— if not thousands of people— I have been able to share the light and the joy and the love of Jesus with. And it makes them happy, and then they go off into the sunset and disappear. Just like all these interesting and exciting people Jesus meets in the gospel. Like the shepherds who go to see baby Jesus in Bethlehem. It was a wild and amazing night with angels and a baby in a stable and they were excited and thrilled. And then they disappeared and never came back. That’s what it’s like being a pastor. You have lots of special moments. But it is a rare thing for someone to be touched by Jesus and to become and remain part of the Church. That doesn’t happen much in my career.

Mark and Matthew are writing their gospels forty and sixty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, maybe twenty and forty years after the death of Peter. They knew that if Jesus hadn’t established a church with Peter that they wouldn’t be writing gospels because there wouldn’t be a church, there wouldn’t be a people of God. Jesus would have been this nice thing that happened. Mary Tyler Moore was a nice thing. She gave people joy. Will Rogers was a great American. He made people laugh. But he’s gone. The rock that Jesus started with Peter is not gone. We’re it. A few of us.

I have my bad days. As the Reformation approaches its 500th birthday, there are days when I think that Protestantism has run amok. Protestantism is about the power of the individual conscience, Protestantism is about the mistrust of organized religion, Protestantism is about your personal relationship with Jesus. Left to its own devices, left alone by the Holy Spirit and the Bible, Protestantism is religious entropy. It is the breakdown and fragmentation of the congregation down into individuals. It is everyone's freedom to be as loud as they want, and to break all the ties that they want. And I think in the year 2017, I may have seen just about enough of radical individualism defeating community. So I have my bad days. As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, radical individualism is run amok. And the actual churches of the Reformation in Europe and North America: many of them will be closed in a generation or two. I have my bad days.

I was reading a commentary on this gospel by a colleague, an ELCA pastor in Yuma in our synod. Brian wrote: *"I think that many people have a hard time accepting that Jesus built and continues to build the church upon sinful human beings. They keep looking for that perfect church."* And then he adds, *"A perfect church doesn't need Jesus."*

Today's story is not a story about the papacy. But it is a story about Peter. And why Peter is special. Peter is the Church. And the Church is important. And Peter is flawed— we saw that two weeks ago when he jumped overboard, we'll see it again next Sunday— Peter is flawed, and so are all of the members of the Church. But the rock of the Church is important. Because Jesus does not come to us by accident. Some people think Jesus is like a candy bar. He comes packaged in the Church but you can take him out and enjoy him and throw the package away.

It isn't that simple. It isn't that way at all. Jesus comes to us because of the rock of people like Peter, people who are built up into the Church. Amen.