

Sermon: What is the Rock We Build On?

Year A, Proper 16

[Isaiah 51:1-6](#); [Psalm 138](#); [Romans 12:1-8](#); [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

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The church is built on a leap of faith. Can you imagine a flimsier foundation? Yet here we are, in the gospel of Matthew, having followed Jesus all over Galilee. The disciples don't realize it yet, but their journey is about to take a turn. They've had the Sermon on the Mount, they've had all the preaching and teaching which has built Jesus' reputation to such a degree that crowds now gather where he is. Just at this moment, they've gotten away from all the crowds, and Jesus asks them a question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15). The disciples don't know it, but their time in Galilee is coming to an end. Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, for the confrontation he knows is coming and he knows is likely to be fatal. "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter, always Peter, first to speak, not always good at thinking things through, the guy who leaps before he looks, gets out of a perfectly good boat to walk on the water to Jesus and then has to be fished out, Peter answers. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Everyone else is talking prophets. Everyone else is talking about things they've seen before. They think Jesus is a prophet. A really good prophet. Possibly the best there ever was. But something the Israelites had experience dealing with.

Peter takes the leap and says Jesus is unique, something never seen before. Peter takes the leap and says Jesus is the Messiah even though Jesus is nothing like what they were expecting the Messiah to be, a king or a general. Peter, who has been wrong more often than he was right, Peter who is about to make a whopper of an error two verses after the end of today's reading and Jesus is going to come down on him like a ton of bricks, Peter takes a leap of faith and says Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 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. (Matthew 16:17-18)

So there it is, the church being founded on a leap of faith. Being founded on this hot mess of a guy who rarely gets things right, who is so flawed, so broken, so incapable of getting it together, but who so loves Jesus that Peter reaches for Jesus again and again, when Peter's faith has come up short. The church is founded on a leap of faith.

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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:18-19).

Jesus founds his church on a leap of faith. That church is not just supposed to announce that there is a kingdom of God or that it's coming or help people prepare for it.¹ The church has the

¹ Charles E. Hambrecht-Stowe, "Proper 16, Theological Perspective, Matthew 16:13-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 384.

keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus prays that God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven – the church connects the two. The church is not just the place where individuals say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." but where a whole community changes its living in this world to make that statement more true and more evident,² that following Jesus puts us all on a path that even the gates of Hell cannot oppose. Jesus gives his church a daunting task, to follow in his footsteps and look at scripture and laws and his teachings to find fresh and creative ways to interpret the will of God in this world.³ The Greek word "church", *ekklesia*, means "called out", not in the sense of rejecting the community we are from but revealing how the world looks when it is shaped in Christ's identity and mission.⁴

Jesus founds his church on a leap of faith. But the church *is* a leap of faith. You answer Jesus' question with "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." and you're headed in directions you didn't expect. You commit your life to Jesus and you think you have the cover for today's bulletin all set and suddenly you're down in the spooky, musty basement of the church, taking pictures of the enormous granite rocks that are the foundation of this church. And the only reason you're able to stand down there and take the picture is because the men of this church hand dug a basement, hand dug, with shovels and a bucket brigade. Talk about life taking you in an unexpected direction. Talk about a leap of faith.

You go down into that musty, scary basement to take the picture, knowing that there are hundreds of perfectly good pictures of granite blocks on the internet you could use instead. But a couple of hundred years ago, give or take, someone got that rock into position with pry bars and oxen and probably a good amount of cursing at the tough New England granite. And that person took a leap of faith that Brookline would matter and the church would matter so he better make sure that that particular rock was where it needed to be. Brookline would only matter, the church building would only matter, if there were people taking leaps of faith that would give witness and prove the truth that we follow a living God.

As a church we support the Neighbors in Need fund here in Brookline. It provides cash for the town's welfare officer to help out local folks with things that don't fit under other categories of help, like the food pantry or fuel assistance. Do we know exactly how that money's being spent? No. And we don't want to know. It's a leap of faith. And we take it because we believe in the kingdom of God, where everyone has their daily bread and are delivered from evil.

As a church we support Bridges and Marguerite's Place, which both help women in crisis. Do we know exactly how that money's being spent? No. And they wouldn't and shouldn't tell us if we asked. It's a leap of faith. And we take it because we believe in the kingdom of God, where everyone has their daily bread and are delivered from evil.

² Jin S. Kim, "Proper 16, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 16:13-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 384.

³ Mitchell G. Reddish, "Proper 16, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 16:13-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 385.

⁴ Dale p. Andrews, "Proper 16, Homiletical Perspective, Matthew 16:13-20" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 383.

As a church we support the UCC Disaster Ministries, which respond to large scale natural disasters, like Hurricane Harvey or the typhoon which has drowned portions of India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Can we as a small rural church in New Hampshire figure out how best to send what we have to those places? No. The scale is simply too great. It's a leap of faith. And we take it because we believe in the kingdom of God, where everyone has their daily bread and are delivered from evil.

When we were given the keys to the kingdom of heaven, we became its stewards. That's what a steward does, keeps the resources of the lord they serve safe and uses those resources appropriately. Included in your bulletin today is a pledge form. Our formal stewardship campaign will run until November. I'm not going to ask for money every week. But often I am going to ask you to reflect on what stewardship really means for you, how you frame it in your life, your budget, your faith. I'm going to ask you to include your decision about your financial support of the church within your own personal definition of stewardship.

Because when Jesus asked "But who do you say that I am?", you answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." You took the leap of faith. You were given the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Not only are you the rock Christ builds on, you decide what this church builds on to bring forth the kingdom of God. Your leap of faith is the church, is the kingdom of heaven in this world. The foundation could not be stronger or more sure.