

THE TURNING POINT

MATTHEW 16: 13-20

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When Fred Craddock lived in Columbia, Tennessee, he had a friend who was the pastor of the largest church in town. In many ways he was a very successful minister, except that his church was full of problems. Whatever happened in that church, whatever anybody said or did, there was always a big problem—at least that was the way Fred's friend reported it. He got sick and tired of it. Fred saw him downtown one day and asked, "How's it going?"

"Terrible," he said, "I'm thinking of quitting."

"Aw, you're not going to quit."

"Well, why not?"

"Because you don't want to quit," Fred said.

"You know what I'm going to do?" the minister replied. "I'm going to buy a little piece of land over in Arkansas in a rice field, and I'm going to build my own church. There's going to be a study where I can do my work, and the church will have a beautiful tall spire, and that will be it. No sanctuary, no Sunday school rooms, no fellowship hall, no members. Just me and God."

Any pastor can understand that Tennessee minister's frustration. I remember John Ciardi writing in the old *Saturday Review* years ago, declaring that "the perfect college at which I am perfectly suited to teach does not yet exist." Well, dear friends, as far as I can determine—after all these years in the pastorate—the perfect church does not exist.

In the hierarchical Methodist system with which I am most familiar, every pastor is appointed for one year at a time (at least theoretically), so along about January of each year when the bishop and the cabinet begin to meet to make appointments for the ensuing year, which begins on July 1, every pastor gets a bit nervous. If your district superintendent or—horror of horrors!—the bishop calls you up and says, "I have a great appointment in mind for you. It's a wonderful church. But....there are some challenges...." Then it's time to duck and run. The word "challenge" is a euphemism for trouble in the church.

Thus, in today's Gospel lection the church represents a huge "challenge."

The story of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ centers around Our Lord's basing His Church not just on Peter's confession but on Peter himself. This is a story that is told in all four Gospels, we need to look at Matthew's unique report. It is a powerful moment in the Galilean ministry of Jesus.

The dramatic power of Jesus' questioning the disciples, the variety of nuanced titles for Jesus, the special blessing of Peter, not to mention the words that follow the lection about Jesus' suffering and death and about the disciples' bearing the cross, are overwhelming.

What makes Matthew's report distinctive is that the writer connects Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God to the reality of the church. Of the four Gospels, Matthew's narrative is the only one that links the declaration of who Jesus is to who the church is. (The only appearances of the word "church" in any of the Gospels are in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17.) Mark's report—which is my favorite—makes clear that prior to this moment at Caesarea Philippi, nobody has confessed Jesus as Messiah. Matthew, on the other hand, makes clear that all the disciples have already confessed Jesus to be the Son of God (14:33).

So, the way that Peter emerges as the recipient of the revelation and the "rock" on which the church is built stands out.

What, then, can we say about the church from this text? First, *the church is rooted in the confession of Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God*. Peter is not special. Neither is the church. I hate to tell you this, friends, but there is nothing special about us as a congregation. Neither our faithfulness nor our brilliance, neither our cunning nor our courage make us the Church. What makes us the Church is that we confess Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

We, unfortunately, are just like Peter who, immediately following this wonderful confession, shows himself guilty of such gross misunderstanding of who Jesus is and what his ministry means, that Jesus ends up calling him "Satan" (16:22-23). Yet both Peter and the Church remain distinctive, and we draw our distinctiveness from the confession that claims us.

Notice also that the insight about Jesus comes as an event of divine revelation. Peter does not reason his way to the acknowledgement of who Jesus is. Sound logic won't ever get you to the conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God. Such knowledge comes only as a divine gift.

Kierkegaard put the issue in a parable about The Prompter. Every dramatic production must have someone who sits in a hidden place to prompt the actors if they forget or tangle their lines in the script. "The actor strides out on the stage to impersonate a distinct individual. In the skillful sense of this illusory art, each word becomes true through the actor—and yet he is told what he shall say by the hidden one that sits and whispers."

So, says Kierkegaard, our "stage is eternity, and the listener, if she is the true listener (and if she is not, she is at fault) stands before God during the talk...The speaker whispers the word to the listeners. But the main concern is earnestness: that the listeners by themselves, with themselves, and to themselves, in the silence before God, may speak with the help of "God the prompter."

It is not a matter of getting the Church's theology right or saying the right words or getting the titles straight. The confessing Church lives because of God's grace and offers that grace to the world. The

uniqueness of the Church derives from a God who graciously initiates a self-revelation and who even now keeps disclosing to the Church who Jesus is.

Second, Matthew makes clear that *the church is always set in a context of conflict*. We are always going to be confronted by the designated opponent who stands at the gates of Hades (which the RSV renders as “the powers of death”).

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a friend who walked out of her church one day several years ago after a particularly rousing Sunday service and bumped into a thin, sort of lost-looking man who was standing on the sidewalk looking up at the cross on top of the church steeple. She excused herself and started to walk away, but the man called her back. “Tell me,” he said, pointing to the front doors into the church she had belonged to most of her life, “What is it that you believe in there?” She started to answer him and then realized that she did not *know* the answer, or did not know how to put it into words, and as she stood there trying to compose something, the man said, “Never mind, I’m sorry if I bothered you,” and walked away.

He *did* bother her, and her story bothers me. If one of those Hyde Park “head cases” were to ask you that question out there on University Avenue today, how would you answer? How would I? Would I point him to the creeds in the Pew Book? Would I say, “Well, Jesus is the Lord of my life”? What would that mean to him? That in spite of George Bush and Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice and Vladimir Putin and Mikheil Saakashvili and the Taliban, the world is in good hands?

The powers of death always, always confront the church. The church is not just a place, a building, and a congregation always exists as part of the larger Church of Jesus Christ. And a congregation is a community engaged in mortal conflict.

And Peter, good ol’ Peter, is the one who realizes this and makes confession, then gets it all so wrong that Jesus has to come down on him like a duck on a junebug (as we say in Arkansas). “You are Peter,” Jesus says, giving Simon Bar-Jona a new name, “and on this rock I will build my church.” But sixteen lines later, we find the rock trying to roll down the hill to crush the mission of Jesus. No sooner does Peter receive his new authority than he begins to argue with Jesus about what is going to happen in Jerusalem. “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus finally says to him in next week’s reading. “You are a stumbling block in my path.”

Jesus seems to choose Peter not because he is the smartest of the Twelve and certainly not because Peter takes time to think things through. He is not a man of flawless character or intellectual profundity. He is impulsive and opinionated, and when push comes to shove on that fateful last Thursday night of Jesus’ life, Peter denies that he knows Jesus at all. About all we can say on Peter’s behalf is that he’s a leader who is willing to say what everyone else won’t say, and he is willing to get knocked down and get back up again.

One problem we have in reading this story is that Matthew doesn’t give us any clues or stage directions or descriptions. Isn’t it possible that when Jesus asked, “What are people saying about me?” a profound

silence fell over the group. “Well, Lord,” somebody undoubtedly wanted to say, “A lot of folks think you’re crazy.” But nobody says that. They probably looked at each other, and then made nice answers.

So when he confronts them: “Who do you say that I am?” It’s ol’ Peter who risks the revolutionary answer, the one that turns out to be not his answer but God’s answer. So Jesus calls him “Petros,” the word for “rock,” but he also calls him “petra” which means a pebble, a small piece of a larger rock. So, Peter is but a chip off the block as well as a huge boulder on which the Church of Christ will be built.

God doesn’t choose either Peter or you or me because we possess all the characteristics needed by the Church. God chooses us, as Jesus chose Peter, because we are perhaps sometimes a rock but at other times a stumbling block.

Jesus’ last encounter with Peter is told not by Matthew but by John. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John and two others go back to Galilee. “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’” (John 21:2-3) They fished all night but they caught nothing. As they came into shore, there was Jesus standing in the early dawn, but they did not know it was Jesus. He said to them, “‘Children, have you any fish?’ They answered him, No.” (21:4). So he told them to put the net on the right side of the boat. They did, and they caught so many fish that they could haul them in.

John said to Peter, “It is the Lord” Peter jumped out of the boat and sprang into the sea. “When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fishing lying on it, and bread.” (v.9). So “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord.” (v. 11-12)

Now the Greek word for “charcoal fire” appears only twice in the Gospels. Here Jesus and his friends are gathered around a charcoal fire, eating fish and bread. “When they finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’” (v. 15)

Jesus persists. He asks the same question of Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Peter gets exasperated not only because he’s being nagged, challenged but also because he doesn’t want his Lord to doubt his commitment.

But notice the other place in the gospels where the Greek word for “charcoal fire” appears, and both we and Peter can understand why Jesus asked the question three times. It was on that fateful last Thursday night of Jesus’ life. John tells us that “the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire because it was cold.” (18: 18) This happened in the courtyard of the palace of Caiaphas the high priest. Peter was standing around that fire on that cold night, trying to remain anonymous as his Lord was being questioned, whipped and humiliated.

You remember what happened around that fire, don’t you? The maid who guarded the door, said to Peter, “Are you not one of this man’s disciples?” He said, “I am not.” Then someone else asked him the same question, and Peter answered, “I am not.” Then another remembered seeing Peter in the garden

of Gethsemane a bit earlier that evening. But again, the third time, Peter denied his Lord. And at once the cock crowed, just as Jesus had warned Peter about his denial.

If there is one biblical character with whom you and I can identify, it's Peter. His faith and his commitment waver back and forth between denial and discipleship, between following Jesus and failing. Peter seems to be strong and decisive, then in the next moment somebody (like Paul) has to say, "You're an idiot."

But always it's not about our achievement, our doing the right, the good thing. It's about God's grace, which forgives and reminds and doesn't pat just us on the head and say, "There, there." Instead, God has hope that even if we do not understand and dare not ask who it is, we will tell the truth and give our very lives to the Church which is founded on this rock.