**Year A – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 16:13-20**

**September 10, 2017**

**Stay Rooted to the Rock!**

Introduction

What a beautiful setting we have here today for our church picnic. The sun is shining, we get to enjoy worshipping our Lord in His beautiful creation. As we sit here today, I want you to picture Jesus and his disciples seated outside, and he is teaching them. They are far north of the Sea of Galilee, in a region called Caesarea Philippi. They are at a bit higher elevation, and the region has many large, rocky cliffs. It’s the perfect setting for Jesus to encourage his disciples to stay rooted to the rock.

Setting the Scene

Jesus here is only months from his death. He is preparing the disciples for what is coming ahead, that he will die soon, and on the third day be raised to life. He tells them to beware of the Pharisees and Sadducees, that they are like yeast which works itself through the whole loaf. They need to be rebuked and avoided so they can’t bring down the whole church.

With all the stress, struggling, and intensity in his ministry, he withdraws with his disciples far north of the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi, and that’s where our lesson begins.

The Text

Verse 13, “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’”

Now, John the Baptist? Isn’t that a strange thought, since John the Baptist and Jesus were alive at the same time? Well, crazy king Herod, who had beheaded John the Baptist, thought that he had come back to life as Jesus. And so that rumor spread. Others say Elijah, and Malachi 4 tells the people to be ready for a second Elijah, but Jesus can’t be it, because Jesus says that John the Baptist was the second Elijah. Others say Jesus is some other prophet.

And this is high praise for Jesus. But it isn’t high enough. It falls short of calling Jesus who he truly is, the Son of God. So Jesus turns it over to the disciples in verse 15, “’But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’” Simon Peter immediately pipes up and says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

When reading this, we can’t help but think, “Atta boy, Peter!” He fully knows that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, as opposed to being just some prophet. And Peter leaves no room for error; his confession is frank, to the point, and he believes it with all his heart.

Now, how was Peter able to see this when so many thought Jesus was only a prophet? Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” Peter wasn’t able to believe these things on his own. The power for this can come only from the Holy Spirit. And so Jesus calls Peter “blessed”, as all believers are blessed.

Jesus goes on, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Now, perhaps you recognize this passage as being the one the Roman Catholic Church uses to establish to office of the papacy. They say that, since “Peter” means “rock”, Jesus must be saying that the church is built upon Peter. And since they believe that Peter was the first pope of Rome, they believe that all the popes who have succeeded Peter are the main authority in the church. Unfortunately, throughout the generations, the popes have decreed things which contradict Scripture. Only the Bible is the Word of God, and anything that contradicts the Bible comes not from God but from Satan, including if it is decreed by a pope.

But, the Greek word that Jesus uses for Peter is “petros”, which means a “boulder” or “loose rock”. The word he uses for “on this rock I will build my church” is “petra” or a rocky cliff. They are two different nouns. So he isn’t referring to Peter as a person, but Peter’s rock-solid *confession* that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, the Son of the living God. And that is a truth that is confirmed throughout Scripture. The church is built on Christ alone, the saving message of Jesus our Savior alone! And that saving truth would later be proclaimed by imperfect people like Peter and all the apostles, and true Christians throughout time. It’s the truth that’s important, over and above the teacher. It isn’t about how powerful the pope is, or how stirring the megachurch preacher is; it’s about the true Word of God. On that rock, the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, our all-powerful and all-redeeming Savior, the church is built.

Part I: Christ the Rock conquers our enemies

And the gates of hell will not overcome it.

But, wait just a second, doesn’t it seem like sometimes the truth is being overcome by the world? Everywhere you look, church numbers are falling. It seems there are less and less Christians in the world, doesn’t it? I don’t have to tell you that. You go out into your daily lives, and it’s an assault on your faith. There are the distractions, the persecutions you endure, and it just seems like God is becoming more and more forgotten in the world.

Does this assault on your faith discourage you as a Christian? Does it make you feel weaker? Like you’re just going to secretly go to church on Sundays, but then live the rest of your life as if you’re one of “them, “ so that your faith is no longer assaulted?

That’s where we turn back to this passage. “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not withstand it.” A church isn’t a building, it’s YOU. All who believe that Jesus is their Savior are members of the Holy Christian Church. And on the rock that Jesus Christ saved you, that he forgives you for your transgressions, that he strengthens you and comforts you with his Word and Sacraments. With the truth that he walked the lonely and painful path to the cross to wipe away your sins. That the stone in front of the grave couldn’t keep him in there. And the very gates of Hades, the underworld, of death, cannot withstand Jesus’ assault!

Jesus said to Satan, “You cannot have my people! Not anymore! They are mine! I paid for the sins of the world, and you can’t touch my people any more. Oh sure, you’ll try your little ways of discouraging them. You’ll send people into their lives who persecute them, who assault them, who try to make them feel weak because of who they are.”

“But I am going on the offensive against you, Satan. Be scared, because you are in big trouble. I will carry my church, my people against you. On the last day they will crush you, and you will never be able to touch them again. And these little cardboard gates of hell that you set up, hoping to protect yourself from me, that you thought were so powerful, my mighty foot crushes them like little sandcastles. They are nothing.

“You are in trouble, Satan. I’ve had enough of you, and built on this rock, the rock that I, Jesus, am the all-powerful God who still protects and cares for his church, my church destroys you and your little forces. So run and hide, because this rock backs the battle on earth too. I back the ministry of my people. And your forces won’t survive there, either.”

Part II: Christ the Rock backs our ministry

Jesus goes on in the next verse, “I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus says to Peter and the disciples, not only is this church, which you will see persecuted, whipped, beaten, and many of its members put to death, including you, disciples, not only will this church overcome the feeble persecution that Satan has set up, but you yourselves have the keys to the kingdom of heaven. I give them to you, and you can know that heaven itself backs your ministry.

Jesus says to them, you will fight battles here on earth. When witnessing to the truth that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, many people won’t want to hear it. They’ll want to rely on themselves, their own goodness, their own arrogant human reason, all these things, for their salvation. You will have to tell them hard truths. You will have to tell them that their living in sin, their indulging their sinful nature is really rejecting Jesus’ forgiveness. You will have to tell them that if they reject the fact that Jesus even existed, that the kingdom of heaven is closed to them. And heaven itself backs you. The Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and all the saints and angels in heaven, they all back you. That is a rock!

But he also says, you can also loosen that door. When proclaiming this harsh judgment on them, many will have terrors of conscience. Many will repent. Many will struggle daily against their sinful nature, trying to drown it with God’s help. There will be some who say, “I do believe! Help me with my unbelief!”

He says, you can loosen that door. Tell them they are forgiven. Tell them that I suffered for every single one of their sins. Give them the peace and joy of hearing of my love for them. Let it sing in their hearts.

And all of heaven backs you then as well as you proclaim forgiveness and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

Conclusion

Now, school just started a few weeks ago at schools across the country. Do any of you remember your first day of kindergarten or preschool? Do you remember your child’s first day of kindergarten or preschool? It affects all children differently, doesn’t it? Some leave and are fearless, are fine without mom and dad around those first several days, and enjoy school.

But then there are some who kick and scream and cry as soon as mommy’s car drives away. They can’t bear to think of being in this strange place without their support, their rock, the person who has been on call to constantly take care of them these last five years. Maybe mommy gets a call from the teacher an hour or two into the day to come and pick up her child because the child simply cannot be without mommy.

Well, sometimes that can be us in the world, isn’t it? Our Lord sends us out into the world to make disciples, to bind and loosen doors, but the new world seems so scary as the devil works through people to attack us. And maybe we go kicking and screaming back into our shells.

I hope that when we go kicking and screaming back into our shells, however, we aren’t giving up. That we’re going back to his Word for strength. Back to prayer. Back to our Christian support group, our church. Because just as that mom or dad continues to be there, strengthening and assuring that child, so the Word, the church, and prayer strengthen and assure us. And that child needs to go to start kindergarten sometime! It can’t just stay uneducated forever! He needs to learn how to read and write.

It’s the same way with us. We can’t just stay in our shell our whole lives. Now is the time for God’s church to go on the offensive. Now is the time to proclaim law and gospel to all around us. Now is the time. Because souls are dying. Because we have an incredible message to proclaim. And because we know that Christ the rock crushes the forces of Satan through the proclamation of his word. He crushes the worldly spirit in people’s hearts and replaces it with a penitent, God-fearing spirit. And Christ the rock backs our ministry.