

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 21, 2011
Rev. Diana Hartman
Worship Theme: Chip Off The Old Rock¹
Matthew 16:13-20

One of my first assignments in my Seminary Systematic Theology class was to right a Faith Statement, a statement of what I believed. This was the first time I was asked to develop formally such a confession of faith, although it would not be the last. (Each time a pastor is called to a new church she or he is asked to provide a Statement of Faith and each time I have rewritten mine.) Once we had completed our first statement of faith, we were given an envelope and instructed to enclose it in the envelope and address it to ourselves. Just after our seminary graduation, these envelopes appeared in our mailboxes. My how ones thought can change in three years.

Now, this could have been an easy assignment if I had just stuck to answering the question with the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and other memorized church statements that were lurking around in my brain. But I knew this was not what my professor was asking. So, I began to ask myself, "What of these statements do you believe and what do you question?" As I wrote my statement, I was not aware that the only eyes that would be looking at my words were my own. And so I carefully and painstakingly committed my faith to paper.

About half way through the first semester, another assignment was given. This time I was to answer, in 1500 words, the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" This time the writing flowed much more easily not because of what I had learned through formal education, but because this assignment seemed to be asking more for a personal witnesses of Jesus in my life, than a formal statement of belief.

In this morning's lesson, Jesus is that Seminary professor asking about what it all means, what he means. Jesus and his disciples have just come into Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has performed miracle after miracle, he has been healing and teaching. His lessons range from obedience to the law to reading the signs of the times.

Every now and then, Jesus stops, turns to his followers, and gives them a pop quiz to see if they understand what he is saying to them. Much to Jesus' displeasure, he is not working with the sharpest pencils in the box. Too often, the metaphors that Jesus uses are taken far too literally by his followers. Time after time, their quiz grades are below the passing mark.

But this time the question Jesus asks is not a quiz on what he has said, but who he is. "Who do the people say I am?" he asks the disciples. Finally, a question they have an answer too. "John the Baptist" one answers and the others begin to recite the answers of what *other* people have told them that *they* believe, "Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet". It's not so tough to repeat what *others* say *they* believe.

They wait for Jesus to give them the correct answer to the quiz question, so they can grade their own quizzes. But the answer they seek does not come. Instead, Jesus asks those closest to him another question, "Who do *you* say that I am? What is it that *you* believe?" No one makes eye contact. "Don't call on me teacher," they think as they fiddle with their fingers and shuffle their feet. It's too bad that we don't have a behind the scenes reporter at this point. I can imagine a bit of a pregnant pause in the conversation as the disciples wrack their brains. And then Peter blurts out, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

And they all sigh a great breath of relief. Thank you Peter for always being the first to step forward, the first to drop his net and follow, the first to step out of the boat onto the water, the first to give an answer whether right or wrong. Thank you Peter for you courageous or is it reckless behavior that gets the rest of us off the hook.

Apparently, this time the answer that Peter gives is the one that Jesus is looking for and immediately Jesus pronounces him blessed, the rock on whom the church will be built and the inheritor of the keys to the kingdom of heaven. It's high fives all around, "way to go Peter," that is, until Jesus speaks again. "Blessed are

¹ The idea for today's sermon comes from Barbara Brown Taylors Sermon, "God's Rock" found in "The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the gospel of Matthew," pp. 69-74.

you,” Jesus tells him, “for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” In other words, “Peter you’ve got the right answer but it’s not your answer. God whispered that answer in your ear.” So, if Peter is caught cheating on his quiz, why then does he get rewarded?

And mind you, this isn’t the first time Peter does not succeed. He began to sink on his walk across the water, and while he seemed to be the one whose hand was first up in the air, he didn’t always have the right answer nor carry through with what he said. Do you remember his promise to stick by Jesus and then as the cocked crowed he denied he even knew him? So how is it that Peter becomes the rock on which the church will be built? Why is it that Peter is rewarded? Why does Jesus give Peter the prize for the right answer?

In the next few verses Jesus renames Simon with his new name Peter with a little tongue in cheek pun, “You are *Petros*,” says Jesus—*Petros* meaning a small pebble or stone, “and on this *Petra*—meaning large bolder, I will build my church.” So this makes Peter a chip off the old Rock, a piece of the rock, against which the powers of death will not prevail.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way, “It’s nothing that he is or says or does all by himself that wins him the keys to the kingdom. He is blessed because his answer is God’s answer, and he is a rock because he is a chunk off the Rock of Ages, and it is on this relationship that the church is built, not on any virtue of Peter’s—or yours, or mine. Peter is chosen, but not because the right answer has occurred to him. On the contrary, the right answer has occurred to him because he is chosen, because Jesus in his unsearchable wisdom, his inscrutable way, decided to pick a bullheaded, bighearted, fallible, stubborn, never-say-die rock upon which to build his church.”²

I must admit, with all his character flaws, Peter is my favorite disciple. He often speaks without thinking and acts without considering the consequences. With him in charge of the church and holding the keys to heaven, I feel sure there may be a chance that he will understand someone like me who uses someone else words to answer the question because I can’t think of my own or it’s easier to repeat what others have said, or because I have not thought enough about it to feel secure in voicing my own opinion or because I have not been willing to trust God to whisper the words into my ear.

And even though just a few verse later, the rock of the church becomes a stumbling block under the feet of Jesus, as he begins to argue with Jesus about what’s going to happen in Jerusalem, Peter remains the rock on which the church is built. He remains God’s chosen rock whether he is acting like a foundation stone or a stumbling block. Peter shows us that blessedness is not about being perfect, but is about being willing to risk our own answers, to try and to fail and to fall and get up again and give it another go. With Peter as the rock on which the church is built, there is hope for all of us.

So, if you walk out of this church one day, and a stranger standing on the sidewalk ask you what it is you believe be ready with an answer, or at least give it your best try at an answer, because your answer matters a great deal. Even though you may not know the person who is asking, you do know the person whom you are answering. Go ahead and give it a try. You may say something stupid, or whose knows, you may hear God’s still small voice and say something inspired. The important thing is to try to say and to live what it is you believe. We are Peter’s kin, so whether we pass the quiz or fail, we too are chips off the old block, pieces of the one true Rock of Ages. We are chips off the old rock against which the powers of death will not prevail. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² Brown Taylor, Barbara, “The Seeds of Heaven”, p. 73.