

Sermon, August 23, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends Alice, Mike and Wesley, otherwise known as Aurora Celtic, for special music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are peaking nationally, and rising again in Maryland; and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Now today's stupid joke.

I told you last week about my friend's on-line dating experience. This week he's trying out a new service that specializes in matching singles who are older. I think it's called Carbon 14 Dating. I told him I read that SINCERITY is the key to successful online dating. He said, "Yeah, I know. Once I can fake that, I'll have it made."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God, with all your faithful followers of every age, we praise you, the rock of our life. Be our strong foundation and form us into the body of your Son, that we may gladly minister to all the world, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fifty-first chapter.

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the sixteenth chapter.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are 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.

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." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Today's gospel reading is traditionally known as "Peter's Confession," and it is among the best-known and most controversial passages of the New Testament. The way Matthew tells it, Jesus today gave Simon the Greek nickname Petros, which is "Peter" in English. Petros literally means "Rock" or "Rocky." And Jesus told him he was the rock on which the church would be built, and then bestowed on him the "keys to the kingdom."

Protestants and Catholic Christians have been arguing over the interpretation of Matthew chapter sixteen for about five hundred years now.

And Catholic and Orthodox Christians for nearly a thousand. My Catholic friends say when Jesus declared Peter the rock and promised him the keys, that's when he created the Papacy.

And they say that Peter, and then all who followed him as Bishop of Rome would become the head of the Church with a capital "C", the "Vicar of Christ," a.k.a. the Pope.

My evangelical friends think that's nonsense. They say Peter was never called or considered a Pope and never exercised anything close to Papal authority, adding that in fact there wasn't even a Catholic Church for him to hold sway over until centuries after Peter was dead and gone. They add that there is no biblical or historical evidence that Peter ever even WENT to Rome, let alone started a church there. Or served as its bishop or was martyred for his faith, as Catholic tradition claims.

My Orthodox friends point out that even if Peter eventually DID go to Rome, he first went to the city of Antioch. In fact, Paul's letter to the Galatians hints that Peter started the Christian Church in Antioch, and Catholic tradition affirms that. The Book of Acts says the Antiochian Church is where followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

So they think if Peter really WAS the first Pope, then the current Pope is NOT Francis the first, but instead sixty-five year old Syrian-born John the Tenth Yazigi, who currently holds the title Patriarch of Antioch, and all the East.

I know, I haven't mentioned Lutherans yet. While 2020 has been an awful year in so many ways, ELCA Lutherans were happy to join other Americans in the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the right of Women to Vote in America this past week.

And in a couple of months ELCA Lutherans will celebrate fifty years of ordaining women as clergy persons in our church. The Orthodox, Catholics and many other Christian denominations and non-denominational churches still don't.

But I bet you can guess where Martin Luther weighed-in on the papacy. He was, after all, excommunicated and sentenced to death by a pope, who also labeled him a heretic and ordered all his writings be burned. Many of Luther's exact words about popes are a bit too salty to repeat here in church, but he wrote extensively about them in a treatise entitled, "Against the Roman Papacy--an Institution of the Devil." (Well, that can't be good.)

Some claimed Luther softened a bit in his Treatise on the Primacy and Power of the Pope. But I don't see how, because that's where he called the pope the "Antichrist;" and, "An apostle of the devil." (Ouch!)

THAT treatise, by the way, is part of the Book of Concord, the collection of official founding documents of the Lutheran Church. The Book of Concord also includes the Smalcald Articles, written in 1537, in which Luther referred to the pope as, "The Accursed Judas." Suffice it to say, Luther didn't think much of the papacy, PERIOD.

But please keep in mind that-- like Matthew--Luther was also writing at a different time, in a different place, under difficult circumstances. Personally I have never thought of men like Benedict XVI, or John Paul II as antichrists, apostles of the devil, or even accursed Judases. In fact,

Scott's confession today is that I have had tremendous respect and admiration for more than a few popes in history.

Probably none more so than the late John the 23rd, who in his short four-and-a-half-year tenure was a champion of human rights, who fought against antisemitism, promoted modern biblical scholarship and led the sweeping ecumenical and liturgical reforms known today as Vatican Two. John also offered to mediate the Cuban Missile Crisis between John Kennedy and Nikita Krushchev, drawing praise from both sides and earning him Time Magazine's Person of the Year honors for 1962.

And there is a lot I admire about today's Pope Francis too. So maybe technically I shouldn't even be a Lutheran, let alone a Lutheran pastor. But I think times and circumstances have changed enough over the last half-millennium that all the name-calling, finger-pointing and harsh rhetoric should change too.

Don't get me wrong. I know there have been LOUSY Popes over the centuries as well. Leo the Tenth and Julius the Third come to mind. Both were said to be serial child abusers. Alexander the sixth fathered illegitimate children all over Rome, and nearly broke the Vatican bank awarding them handsome endowments at the church's expense.

Thanks to numerous rapes, acts of adultery and the occasional murder, even the much-admired St. Peter Damian called Benedict IX "a demon from hell." Sure, we are all flawed human beings. But some of those guys especially so.

So I'm not really sure what to make of Peter or his famous Confession. Or for that matter exactly what Jesus said today about keys, and what he meant by it. Mark and Luke tell this story too, but neither has Jesus building his church on Peter or trusting him with any keys.

I do remember that a couple of weeks ago Matthew said Peter walked on water with Jesus, and none of the other gospels say that either.

Some suspect Matthew may have exaggerated Peter's importance for the benefit of his first readers, who believed their church to be founded by him. It WAS, some scholars say, likely based in Antioch. Not only are Christians not of one mind about popes, we also don't agree on those so-called "keys."

Catholics define the power of the keys as the power bestowed on the pope to excommunicate, to set church policy and render binding interpretations of Scripture.

The Orthodox, on the other hand, say all Bishops have that authority. Luther thought the Power of the Keys was limited to who you admit or exclude from your church, and he said ALL pastors and priests have that right and responsibility.

So I suppose I should disclose my own rigorous admissions standards for St. Mark's: Everyone's welcome! Come back! Come often! Bring friends!

Matthew's first readers likely had a completely different understanding of the power of the keys, or the "power to bind and loose." Remember this was a group of third generation Jewish Christians who were being snubbed and / or persecuted in their own communities, probably in some cases their own homes, and certainly in their neighborhood synagogues because of their Christian faith.

They knew all about the concept of binding and loose-ing, because it was a part of synagogue tradition. The words "bind and loose" come

from the Hebrew words asar and hitir, and they are probably better translated as “forbidding” and “permitting.”

Those are terms used to describe the authority afforded synagogue leaders, who back then were mostly Pharisees, and today are modern rabbis. Both are charged with establishing community standards that are consistent with Jewish Law.

Truth is, most such decisions on asar v’hitir matters are not as earth-shattering or momentous as who gets into heaven, whose sins are forgiven, or who is allowed in church.

I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with my friend and mentor Rabbi Myer Samberg in my college years, and I learned that the permitting and forbidding part of his job was usually pretty mundane.

They were mostly practical decisions on things like whether or not an egg has a blood spot in it and should be discarded. Or whether a particular chicken or a glass of wine or grape juice qualified as kosher.

Asar v’hitir deals with down to earth, day-to-day things, like whether or not your non-Jewish fiancé or adopted child needs to convert before the wedding or bar mitzvah. Today rabbis are often consulted about medical care. To determine things like if a medical emergency is serious enough to allow a Jewish surgeon to work on the Sabbath.

So I suspect today Jesus merely granted the synagogue’s binding and loosing authority to Peter and not so much power over all of Christendom. But the more I think about it, the idea that Jesus would choose Peter to be in charge of ANYTHING is surprising. Even with Matthew’s best sugar-coating, the “Rock” was still the brash one noted first and foremost for acting and speaking without thinking.

When first called as a disciple Luke says Peter tried to get out of it. He didn't understand Jesus' parables last month. And remember, this so-called "rock" sank JUST LIKE ONE, when trying to walk on water at the Sea of Galilee. Next week Peter will say something so outrageous that Jesus will call him "Satan."

It is also Peter who three times denied he even knew Jesus, the very same day he swore he'd never do that. So tell me, would YOU build YOUR church on the likes of him? I wouldn't. Or trust him with the keys to ANYTHING? Of course not.

But you know, I bet neither Jesus nor Matthew ever meant for this story to cause arguments over Peter's worthiness, the validity of the papacy or whether we should hold the Church in Rome in higher esteem than the older one in Antioch.

In fact, I think even though we call it "Peter's Confession," this story was really more about Jesus than Peter. The Jesus who knows that the rest of us don't really measure-up either. The Jesus who knows WE at times are brash and thoughtless and speak without thinking, and at times are just as unworthy as Peter.

Maybe Peter's Confession is more a story about the Jesus who recognizes that we all stumble. But is still willing to comfort, assure and encourage us; pick us up, dust us off and love us anyway, in spite of ourselves.

So what do YOU think about Peter? Was he Vicar of Christ or Anti-Christ? Or Judas or Satan, or maybe the first Christian Rabbi? On further review, I suspect Peter, like you and me, was really just an ordinary guy. Who became an extraordinary guy. Because he believed

in an awesome Jesus. Who, for no good reason I can think of...believed in him, and also believes in us.

Amen