

Lectionary 21 A  
On a Rock, Not an Oyster

August 27, 2023  
Matthew 16:13-20

What's the difference between a rock and an oyster? I once heard an oyster described as a rock with a stomach. Rocks and oysters can look a lot alike, but oysters are living creatures. Rocks are hunks of dead minerals. Oysters can do a few things for themselves. Early in their lives, they can move through the water on their own power. Then they attach themselves to rocks or stones or wood in the ocean. Rocks move if somebody kicks them or a bulldozer pushes them or dynamite blasts them. Then can't move on their own. They require some other source of power to move.

The same word for rock is used earlier by Jesus. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on **rock**. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on **rock**."<sup>1</sup> As many in California have discovered, if their houses are not connected to solid rock, the storms can wash them away.

The word Jesus uses for the rock he will build his church on, refers to huge, solid bedrock. It's the word used for the huge rock where Jesus was buried. A different word is used for the large, but smaller rock rolled in front of the tomb; and for the stones that were picked up to be thrown at people. The church is on solid footing. That's one way to understand this verse.

However, solid and stable aren't words we would usually use to describe Peter. Even though Jesus gives Simon the nickname "Peter," which means "rock." Peter was a man who wasn't very rock-like. He vowed not to deny Jesus, then denied him. He promised to support Jesus in the garden, then fell asleep. He walked on water, had doubts and fears, and sank – like a stone. Maybe that's why he's called, "Rock."

Next week Jesus will call him by a different name. Peter the rock, will become Satan the tempter. (You'll have to come back next week to hear more about that.) He was rock-like in the sense he sometimes acted like he had rocks in his head. Peter doesn't seem like a very reliable rock to build a church on, but that's what Jesus said he would do.

As I studied this text, I decided the Peter was a good Lutheran. He took seriously Martin Luther's advice to sin boldly. You can read the whole quote in the bulletin. Peter was a man of action – and sometimes it was the wrong actions.

Peter did not have a perfect faith. He didn't always say or do the right things. Sometimes he was a great help to Jesus. Other times he was a great hindrance. I have a suspicion that some of us are like that.

The church is a lot like Peter. It is not perfect, and we shouldn't expect it to be. It was built on Peter. I imagine that every congregation has had members who left it because it wasn't quite perfect enough for them. They will find imperfection in the next congregation they join, too. They are all built on Peter – the imperfect disciple. That's who Jesus built his church on. Not a perfect saint. Peter was a mixed-up, sinful believer just like you and me. The church Christ builds on earth will never be perfect. Christ uses us – imperfect and sinful saints as his building stones. We are living stones of every shape, size, color, and with many other differences.

What makes us the church, with all our differences, like all the different stones in a wall,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:24-25

is the mortar – the stuff that holds the rocks together and makes a strong, solid wall. Jesus is the mortar that unites us and keeps us together. We are stones. We can be different. We are different. God created us different. Everyone one of us in unique. At the same time, God unites us and holds us together through Jesus as a strong church that the gates of Hades – that death – cannot prevail against us.

Back to the oyster: oysters can do a few things for themselves. They have some freedom of movement and of will. In theological terms, an oyster represents Pelagianism. This was a false teaching in the fifth century that believed that humans were basically good and could decide on their own to follow Jesus. In Luther's time, there was semi-pelagianism, that believed God helped us make our own decision to follow Jesus. A song I used to sing, "I have decided to follow Jesus" is an oyster song. It declares that I have the power to decide to become a Christian.

A great deal of our common American theology is oysterish. We want to have freedom to decide and create our own fates. That isn't orthodox Christianity. We are rocks, not oysters.

A rock does nothing. A rock can do nothing. Things can be done to rocks. They can become jewelry. They can become a solid wall or foundation. It is the work of the lapidary or stone mason that turns rocks into something beautiful and useful. It's not something the rock does for itself.

When Peter makes his good confession, Jesus gives God the credit, "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven."<sup>2</sup> Peter is a rock. On his own it was impossible for him to know Jesus as the Messiah the Son of the living God. Such knowledge, such faith, comes as a revelation from God.

In Martin Luther's Small Catechism, he begins the explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed with: "I believe that I *cannot* by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him." We are rocks. We *cannot* move ourselves to Jesus. Not even the little movements of oysters. We *cannot* create faith in Jesus. We *cannot* believe in Jesus by our understanding or efforts. Your faith is a gift from God. It was given to you in baptism. It is fed and nourished through Holy Communion. It is strengthened and supported through our fellowship with other believers – where Christ is present. We continue to learn about all that God is doing for us through the Scriptures – the Word of God.

Earlier in Matthew, John the Baptist tells declares: "God is able from these **stones** to raise up children to Abraham."<sup>3</sup> In the First Letter of Peter it says: "Like living **stones**, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

The God that raised the crucified Jesus to life, can make stones live. God gave bumbling Peter the proper confession. God empowered the denier Peter into the one who proclaimed Jesus before thousands on the day of Pentecost.

If rocks are going to have faith, it has to come from God. If rocks are going to build a church, the power has to come from God. The mortar that holds us together has to come from God. If rocks are going to make disciples of all nations, it will have to be God working through our efforts.

However, looking at this rock-faith from the other side: the fact that you are here this

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:17b

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:9

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 2:5

morning, gathered together in Jesus' name, means that God is active in you. The fact that you are hearing the Word means that God is active in you. The fact that you desire to receive Christ in the sacrament means that God is active in you. Trust the God who is already living and active in your life.

It's with imperfect people like Peter and you and me that the power of God is clearly needed and given. It's with people like us – people who are different from each other that Jesus is building the church out of us living stones. With Jesus as the mortar holding us together, the gates of Hades cannot prevail against us.