

“No Greater Thing”

Matthew 16:13-18

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Today is Stewardship Sunday, which is just another way of saying that today is a day for memory and hope; a day of thankfulness for the gift of faith; a day of generosity as an expression of our gratitude. But what exactly is this gift of faith that we celebrate?

Is it an idea or an emotion? A submission of trust or a subscription to a set of beliefs? The strength of our convictions or the embrace of our uncertainties, in light of Someone who has blessed us with the courage to believe?

Faith means different things to different people. But the faith which lies at the heart of the Church can be narrowed down to one thing—like one star above us, or one candle with power to light up a whole room:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

This is the Great Confession, the statement made by Simon Peter to Jesus that changed everything--except the promise of living it out redemptively, as the work in progress he was.

Over the course of his entire life, Peter came to understand the full meaning of his faith in Jesus. And one way or another, so will we.

II

These last few days have been a case in point, as America has struggled through a difficult election and the lack of resolution which continues. What are we to understand? Whom should we trust in or believe? Add to this the exponential spread of the virus as winter closes in, and now the true colors of a fear-based versus a faith-based approach to living are becoming vividly clear, *“For such a time as this.”*

In many ways, living as a Jew in 1st Century Palestine offered similar fears and uncertainties without the comforts of a 21st Century American lifestyle. There was leprosy, famine and drought; a brutal occupation dominated the land with a foreign culture and religion. Oppressive taxation made life miserable and the people longed for a Savior: the Return of their King.

Jesus began his itinerant ministry as an evangelical rabbi teaching the Kingdom of God, but people came to see him as more than that. They said he was like one of the Prophets of old—like Jeremiah or Elijah himself, who one day would return to herald the coming of the Messiah. Some thought he was John the Baptist, returned from death to prepare the Way of the Lord. Jesus himself used the term “Son of Man” to describe himself: a title rich with meanings from both Israel’s past and the coming Day of Judgment.

As they traveled up to the very northern border of Israel after Jesus’ Feeding of the 4000, and as they approached the city of Caesarea-Philippi, where stood a temple to the God Pan, Jesus began to shift his teaching from the aspects of the Kingdom to the aspects of himself. *“But who do you say that I am?”* he asked them, as the headwaters of the Jordan River rushed over the rocks beside them and they walked beneath the pines. And all were silent, until Simon murmured, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* “The Christ is another way of saying, “the Anointed One.” And who is this? This is the Messiah, the long-awaited King, come to liberate Israel and ascend the throne in Jerusalem. To say, “I believe in Jesus Christ” is to say, “I believe in King Jesus—the son of David.” But what about the last affirmation: “You are the Son of the living God?” This title carries divine significance, far more than any Roman Emperor purporting to be a son of Zeus. This speaks to the heart of what would, in time, become the bedrock of the Christian faith: that Jesus is Lord; that the Father and Son are One; and that Jesus, the son of Mary, is “God-with-us,” our Lord Emmanuel.

Peter was the first to recognize Jesus’ true identity in all three dimensions, yet our Lord sternly forbade his disciples to tell anyone else who he was. Why? Because the titles themselves were fraught with peril, and because none of them as yet understood the truth about Jesus’ kingship: that it was not of this world; that his crown would be made of thorns; that his throne would be a cross. No, they were not yet ready to believe that. But Jesus was ready to believe in them. Listen to what he says:

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah (acknowledging Peter’s father just as Peter acknowledged his). For flesh and blood (that is, Peter’s human capacities) did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.” And now comes the blessing itself, with prophetic power and promise: *“And I myself say to you, you are Rock—and on this rock I will build my church, and the pillars of Death will not prevail against it.”*

Wow. That is a powerful promise—one that the Church has long understood to rest in the person of Simon Peter and through him by apostolic succession to the institutional church, which through the Sacraments held the keys to our salvation.

But the Reformers interpreted this text differently. It was not Simon, but Simon’s faith that was the Rock—the bedrock which would define and uphold the Church. *“You are the Messiah, the*

Son of the living God.” It is Christ and Christ alone who is Head of the Church. The church has lost its way whenever the breadth, height or depth of this confession has been diminished or relativized—or when other assertions have been added to it as essential for our salvation. As St. Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...” And as St. Anselm expressed it, “I believe in order that I may understand.” This is the Rock of Faith—the Rock of Ages. As Dale Brunner says in his Commentary on Matthew, “When we, like Peter, point to Jesus as the divine answer to human needs we are rock, and Jesus promises to use us, too, to build his church.”

III

But there’s another aspect to this story that I wish to conclude with this morning: the blessing of faith itself. When Peter made his confession, do you not think that Jesus did not know what was to come? Do you think he did not know that Peter would deny him three times in the courtyard of the High Priest Caiaphas, before fleeing into the night?

Of course he did. And yet he blessed him anyway, promising to build his church not on Peter’s human failings, but on the power of faith itself to bring about a new birth and a new creation through the work of the Holy Spirit.

--When Jesus called Matthew the tax collector, what did he see? *A leader of the Apostolic Church.*

--When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, what did he see? *A woman freed from self-loathing.*

--When Jesus met Nicodemus at night, what did he see? *A friend and defender.*

--When Jesus looked up on the woman taken in adultery, what did he see? *A forgiven sinner able to amend her life...*

--And when Jesus looks on you, what does he see? *A work of faith in progress—a beloved child of God.*

That’s what faith accomplishes.
Jesus’ faith in us.

Our faith in Jesus. And

Conclusion

Author and minister Frederick Buechner wrote,

“Far beneath all my misgivings, there is always the assumption that, beyond my power to understand, all is well...we will, like Pascal, place our wager on God.”

But if faith is a gift, then Christ also is placing his wager on us. Think about that. Christ does not only see us as we are. He sees us as we will be. And not even death can bring that to an end.

On this day of memory and hope, listen to the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick:

“Fear imprisons, faith liberates; fear paralyzes, faith empowers; fear disheartens, faith encourages; fear sickens, faith heals; fear makes useless, faith makes serviceable; and most of all, fear put hopelessness at the heart of life, while faith rejoices in its God.”

Today is Stewardship Sunday, when we are asked to pledge our time, talents and treasure to build up Christ’s church. My prayer is that you, like Deb and I, will make your commitment today with faith, trusting in Christ alone, and with the same joy that filled the hearts of the first believers as they provided for others and broke bread together *“with glad and generous hearts.”*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.