

On Peter and the Church

Matthew 16:13-20

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

One.

Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Peter confesses that Jesus is the anointed one. He is the proper heir of David's throne. He is the proper successor to Melchizedek the priest. He is the proper fulfillment of the prophets of old.

His reign consummates all other reigns that came before Him and authorizes all reigns that come after Him. His sacrifice consummates all sacrifices that came before Him and authorizes all priests who come after Him. His prophetic ministry consummates all the prophets who came before Him and authorizes all prophets who come after Him. He is the Christ.

He fulfills the promise made to David and executes God's will on earth the way that God wants it executed. He thereby makes Israel to be an everlasting nation. He fulfills the sacrifices that the priests offered in the temple day after day, by making the supreme sacrifice of Himself, suffering in behalf of others to redeem them. He brings forth the Word of God such that there is nothing left to say except what He said in each successive generation. He is the Christ.

Flesh and blood did not reveal this to Peter. All flesh and blood could perceive was a preacher from Nazareth who had the ability to do some amazing things. All flesh and blood can see is His crucifixion. Flesh and blood can see nothing else. Therefore flesh and blood cannot confess that Jesus from Nazareth is the Christ.

Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ because the Father in heaven had revealed it to Peter. This means that Peter's confession does not even come from himself. Peter himself is flesh and blood. So Peter did not figure out who Jesus is by his own reason and strength. The Father revealed it to Peter. Peter confesses what the Father reveals.

And Jesus rewards Peter for it.

Two.

Peter is the rock.

I have heard Lutherans stand on their heads to try to get this passage to mean something other than what it plainly means. The name "Peter" means "rock" in Greek. So when Jesus says, "I say to you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build My Church," He is saying, "You are the rock and on this rock I will build My Church." If any ancient Greek grammarians in the congregation want to discuss the difference in genders between Peter and the word "rock" I will be happy to do it after Divine Service. The rock that Jesus is talking about is Peter himself. Jesus promises to build His Church on Peter.

The reason that we Lutherans do not like what Jesus obviously says is because we know that there are those who abuse what our Lord says and they create a succession of Peters down through the ages upon which the Church is supposedly built. Such successors are commonly called popes. But our Lord does not mention popes in this passage. Our Lord does not mention successors to Saint Peter in this passage. Our Lord mentions only Peter. The Church is built on him and not on any kind of successor to him save those who share his confession of faith.

It should not surprise us that Jesus builds His Church on Peter. In Ephesians, chapter two, he says that the Church is built on all of the apostles and the prophets. In describing the Church as the

temple of God on earth where the Holy Spirit dwells, God instructs us that His Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

The apostles are the Lord's designated witnesses to His death and resurrection. They are also witness to all of the saving events of His life. They are therefore the authorities in the Church on who Jesus is, what He said, and what He accomplished. There are no other authorities. And even they did not receive their confession by flesh and blood. So do not be deceived. Believing in an apostle or prophet is the same thing as believing in God. What the apostle or prophet says does not come from flesh and blood. Since it does not come from flesh and blood it does not come from themselves. It comes from the Father in heaven who revealed it to them. Therefore to believe what an apostle said is to believe what the Father has revealed. Therefore to be built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets is to be built on the foundation of God. This is why God says further in Ephesians, chapter two, that Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Without Him the whole thing falls apart.

Now if the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, then among them is Peter and the Church is therefore built on Peter.

This does not establish papal claims. It rather establishes apostolic ones.

Three.

Jesus gives Peter real authority.

Jesus gives Peter the office of the keys. He gives Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.

David had keys to his kingdom. They were given to Him by God. What David opened could not be shut. What David closed could not be opened. It gave a permanency to the authority of David. By giving David such permanent authority God also gave him reliable authority. Israel could rely on David's authority because God had given it to him.

This is the authority to which Jesus is heir. If Jesus forgives, the person in question is forgiven. If Jesus condemns, the person in question is condemned. And so the woman whom Jesus forgave is forgiven. The paralyzed man whom He forgave is forgiven. The Pharisees and the scribes over whom He pronounced woes are condemned.

It is these keys which our Lord passes on to Peter. Peter now has the authority of the keys of the Kingdom of heaven. If Peter releases someone to enter the kingdom of heaven, they will enter it. If Peter binds someone to prevent them from entering the kingdom of heaven, they are bound.

This is not to be understood in a magical way as if Jesus has handed off some authority which Peter may now use as Peter sees fit. Peter still has a Lord. Peter shall use this authority in the way in which the Lord commands him to use it otherwise the Lord will not honor its use, but take it from him to give to another who will use it properly.

The Lord's purpose in giving this authority to Peter is so that Peter's words may carry weight and that Peter may be able to offer people more than wishful thinking when it comes to God and His mercy. For example, if Peter did not have the office of the keys the most he would be able to say with any kind of certainty is that he hoped that God would be merciful on you. But with the office of the keys Peter has actual authority from God to tell you that Jesus is the Christ and that God His Father is merciful toward you. He thereby releases you for entrance into the Kingdom of heaven.

All those who have Peter's confession of faith also have this authority. This authority is given to everyone who confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We hold the office of the keys in common and not as a series of individuals. In other words it is not the case that one of us can use the office of the keys to admit someone into the kingdom of heaven while someone else in the congregation can use the office of the keys to prohibit them from entering the kingdom of heaven. That is not how it

works. The office of the keys is not magic. If it were, we would all have to live in doubt as to whose voice in the Church to believe, this person or that person.

The Church holds the keys in unison. We exercise them together according to the Lord's own words. We exercise them individually according to the vocation that God has given to us. A father exercises the keys with His children teaching them the fear of God and faith in Him and by so doing releasing them to enter into the Kingdom of heaven. A pastor does them when he presides at a baptism or preaches to His congregation. That is his calling. If flesh and blood had baptized the Boyer children their baptisms would have meant nothing and I am only flesh and blood, but since my vocation is to preach and teach the congregation on behalf of God and baptism is instituted in that Word of God, then I have the privilege to baptize. And because of the office of the keys I did not baptize the Boyers, their Father in heaven did. He made all of the arrangements including the sacrifice of own dear Son to purchase the forgiveness that He so freely bestowed upon them. He is the One who ascended into heaven in order to send them the Spirit from the Father.

The purpose of the keys is not for us to imagine that we are no longer flesh and blood. It is not for us to pretend that we are God and to make judgments according to our whims. The purpose of the keys is so that we can give real assurance to people who need it. Yes, Jesus died for you. Yes, His atonement is for you. Yes, His cross is for you.

Four.

The Church then is the gathering of all people on earth no matter where they are who believe the absolution spoken to them by the holder of the office of the keys. That is a fancy way of saying, the Church is the sum total of all true believers in Jesus on earth. And since they would never have believed in the One of whom they have not heard, the Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. The gates of hell shall not prevail against this Church.

A word about Protestant vagary. There is a temptation among us Protestants to so exalt the Reformation as to say that the Church ceased to exist until the Reformation came along and restored all things. There are Protestants who believe this. I have never heard any of you say anything like this, which is good, but just in case we might be tempted to think this: the holy Christian Church has always stood from the day of its founding. She has never ceased to exist. She has never stopped working. Faith has never disappeared and then come back to earth. There have always been believers in Jesus down through the ages. While the Church has abused the office of the keys and the Lord has not honored her when she did, He still has not taken the office of the keys from her. She is still His Church. She still has His word bequeathed to her by the apostles and prophets.

Luther was a great man. But if he had not done what he did someone else would have and we would be going by a different name. Luther discovered the Gospel in the Greek New Testaments that he was privileged to read. Other people before him had made the same discovery. Other people had written of the Gospel prior to him in a correct fashion or at least as correct as he did. What Luther was correcting was the abuses and false doctrine that were heaped upon the Church by the preachers of indulgences. He may not have understood how far the problems actually went, but then the gates of hell do not prevail against the Church so no matter how bad the problems were there were always true believers in Jesus both before the Reformation and after.

The Church does not need men or anyone else to make her great. Her Lord makes her great. She has the authority to speak on His behalf and speak into the world she does. She speaks a word of light into darkness. She speaks a word of comfort into sorrow. She speaks a word of absolution to the sinner. She speaks a word of correction to the straying. She speaks a word of God's love in a world filled with

hatred toward God. She speaks the word of God that creates what it says that it will create and therefore she brings forth eternal life.

The devil cannot stop it nor all his hoard. Hell and damnation cannot stop it, though they might try. Evil cannot overcome it, though sometimes it appears that it has done so.

The Church makes us great. We are privileged to be her members. We have the confession of the apostles. We have the authority of the keys. We will prevail against all the forces of evil. The Lord had said it and He will do it.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.