

What Are You Made of?

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 12A

Matthew 16:13-20

A desk drawer full of rocks: that is all I had to show as souvenirs from the places my family had visited on vacation when I was a child. My mother, not wanting to spend a dime of family money on the cheap, kitschy, gift-shop trinkets that children can't resist, suggested in one of my bouts of whining for a knick-knack that I simply take a rock from each place to remind me of the occasion. She might have said it flippantly, but I complied, thinking it was the only option left. So over the course of several years, I gathered a piece of shale from that point of interest, a smooth river rock from this place, a chunk of quartz from over by that campsite. They were to become my mementos, tokens that could tell me something about the places I'd been, the experiences I'd had, the person I'd become.

But years later, when my mother informed me I needed to empty out my desk's contents so that it could be moved with the rest of my cherished belongings to seminary, I opened the bottom drawer to find a pile of rocks that told me...absolutely nothing. I couldn't remember which rock had come from which place, which stone was supposed to remind me of which memory. Was this purplish one from the time we went camping in the mountains of West Virginia? Was this small, white pebble from the Mall in Washington, D.C., or did I pick it up somewhere else? And there were about five flat, nondescript rocks that had obviously been worn soft by water somewhere—but which river, which beach? Looking down at them from above, they looked so scattered and pitiful. I racked my brain: from where did these rocks come? From which distant roadside quarry had they been hewn, and—for Pete's sake—which memories should be attached to them?

This is the same message to the people of Israel, years before, as they try to imagine life beyond the hardship of exile, a life back in their blessed homeland beyond the river. Benevolent King Darius has promised to free them from Babylon's grip, and he looks down upon them from his throne in Persia and sees them, so scattered and pitiful and doubtful of his assurances that they will ever return. And so, with great encouragement, he reminds them to look to their past experiences. *Look to the rock from which you were hewn,* he calls out, *"look to the quarry from which you were dug!"* Look to Abraham and Sarah, he means, the flinty types that bore you long ago. They were rocks of faith who once set out, alone and wandering, yet who became a nation of great number and great blessing. These are the rocks from which you were hewn. This is the stuff you are made of, King Darius says. When I "bring near my deliverance your destiny will be little different," he goes on, "for this is the quarry from which you were dug."

God's people, themselves, are reminders to the world, souvenirs of God's amazing faithfulness and improbable power. Pitiful and scattered though they may be, they are nevertheless hewn and dug from much stronger stuff, and therefore there is promise for the future, something to build upon. The "stuff they're made of" hearkens back not only to their strong ancestors and the faith they displayed, but mainly to God's determination to do something wonderful for God's people. His salvation, you see, will be forever! He moved them through their wanderings and gave them a purpose. And they will dwell in their land and with God's teachings they will live as a light to the nations, a beacon of justice and compassion for all.

What are you made of? When you dig deep down what mineral is there that determines your character, your strength, your direction? Do you feel nameless, scattered and pitiful, unaware of what hillside someone chipped you from?

These questions are not limited to Israel's yearnings millennia ago. They shape our patterns for life now. Look at the political candidates now gearing up for the fall, endlessly burnishing their street cred at the beginning of the campaign path. Or see the college students arriving on a campus for the first time, presented with a dizzying array of academic paths as well as social life temptations. What about the scared patient who faces the cancer diagnosis as well as the daunting chemo regimen that goes with it. "Show 'em what you're made of," we like to say.

Are we surprised, then, when the question rumbles around in Jesus' head as he approaches the great rock face in western Israel that holds up Herod's gleaming new city of Caesarea Philippi. He has gone there with his disciples to escape the crowds for a while, contemplating his daunting trip to Jerusalem. And he looks up at the cliffs where ancient pagans had placed statues of their gods, and up at the new edifices that clearly spoke to the strength of Caesar's empire and asks them, "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" as if to say, "What am I made of? What are people saying?" And receiving a list of responses, he turns to them, his closest friends, the ones who know him best: "Who do you say that I am." Peter's confession couldn't be more right-on. "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,*" he answers, although Peter has no idea what kind of Messiah-stuff Jesus is really made of.

It is a turning point in his ministry. Here, at the base of a massive rock structure that for centuries had been used as a place for people to pin their hopes and prayers, Jesus' true identity begins to come into focus. It is a turning point in his ministry. Someone has finally nailed down exactly who Jesus is, for each of those terms is loaded with meaning: Messiah. Son. Living. God. Jesus is sent straight from the Lord who delivered ancient Israel, who called Abraham and Sarah. He himself is part of God's own creative and redeeming presence that will bring about lasting justice and peace. It is a turning point in his ministry, for all the teachings and feedings and healings he's been about can now be seen as tokens of that living kingdom that God is establishing on earth.

Peter's response to Jesus' questions about the Messiah's identity is so right-on, in fact, that Jesus answers by telling Peter what he is made of. Making a word-play on his name, Peter, Jesus claims that Peter and his words of faith are a rock on which Jesus' own following will be built. (Peter's name means "rock," both in Greek and Aramaic.) Scattered and pitiful group that they are, the disciples will eventually become the granite core of a community that will embody Jesus' life on earth. Not even the powers of death will be able to prevail against their life together as their congregation grows to include people of all nations. Like ancient Israel, they will become living reminders to all people of God's amazing faithfulness and improbable power.

In fact, their confession and their life together will be so crucial to the world's understanding of Jesus, he says, that he gives them keys to the kingdom; that is, tools by which they will provide access and entry to others who experience Jesus as the Son of the Living God. "*Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,*" Jesus instructs, *and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

The life of Jesus' community of followers, the church, is given many tasks and missions throughout the course of the New Testament. Baptizing people, teaching them God's Word, sharing the Lord's Supper, praying, healing, to name several. But here Jesus connects the keys of his kingdom directly to the

forgiveness of sins. There is something about practicing forgiveness and taking forgiveness seriously that relates directly to the experience of God's reign. Loosing refers to proclaiming release from bonds of sin, and binding refers to the withholding of forgiveness, presumably until proper repentance and contrition is made.

It is significant that Jesus links the strength and vitality of his church with its capacity to proclaim and embody forgiveness. The strength and vitality of the church is not ultimately found in its service to others, in how many feet we wash or in the number of members who have joined. The strength and vitality of the church is not primarily found in how inclusive we think we're being or in how diverse our membership is, but in our willingness to announce and practice the forgiveness of sin. Our practice of repentance and reconciliation is a direct reflection of how Jesus deals with us in the first place: how he becomes the type of Messiah that dies on the cross to cleanse the world from sin.

Considering this point, are we surprised that "the forgiveness of sins" is one of the first things we name in the part of the Apostles' Creed that has to do with the church? Here, in one of the church's most ancient statements of belief, that may even have been written before much of the New Testament, we declare "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." With that little phrase so nestled in the core of our faith we can see how instrumental the church becomes in times and places when bonds need to be healed and restored. The church in South Africa, for example, helped bring about a surprisingly peaceful end of the racist apartheid regime in the nineties. Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted, against significant secular opposition, that real forgiveness be a part of that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Faith leaders have often been at the forefront of our own countries recent struggles with race, urging members to hear and receive the cries of those who are hurting and those who need to be forgiven. Considering Jesus' point about the keys of the kingdom, we can think how many times we've sat in a worship service, struggling with some hidden guilt or shame and needing to hear, above all else, that we are forgiven. And we all know how a word or gesture of true forgiveness brings us back to life. He is the Son of the *Living* God.

Forgiveness, you may say, the binding and loosing from sin, turns out to be the main stuff Jesus is really made of, the rock from which he is hewn and, incredibly, he asks the church to practice it in his name. On the cross it is what he is made of, and so in our baptism we become made of it, too.

Earlier this week as our family sat at the dinner table, our four-year-old looked at my wife out of the blue and asked, "Mommy, how does God build us?" We've been fielding such existential questions from him for a few months now, and he's learned to address my wife because he knows he'll get a clearer, better answer. Glancing quickly at one another with our eyebrows raised, my wife carefully responded by saying something like, "God builds us carefully in our mommy's tummy when we're a little baby." Silence. Her quick thinking seemed to answer the question.

I was relieved Melinda let me off the hook. I shudder to think where my response would have led us. But, like so many musings from the younger ones around us, it's an excellent question. And while I do hope that all our biological parts and pieces are being stitched together seamlessly and perfectly, both within our mommy's tummy and outside of it, my hope is that God is also building us through faith and opportunities of service, teaching us compassion and love, but, most of all, to say "I'm sorry" when we need to and to extend the hand of forgiveness when the circumstance calls for it.

So, my dear friends, I hope God is building you the way he promises to build the rest of us: carefully, yes, and with the hope that, over time, our words and actions will so closely reflect Jesus' that it will be unmistakable—even when we feel scattered and pitiful—from which great rock we were hewn: Messiah. Son. Living. God.

—*The Rev. Phillip W. Martin, Jr. © 2020*