Peter, the typical Christian

Matthew 16:13-20

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Ideally, the account in Matthew 16 about Peter is taken up as one story which begins with his confession: "You are the Christ" and then ends with Jesus' rebuke of him (Matthew 16:16) and ends with Jesus' rebuke of him, saying: "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matthew 16:23).

But the lectionary committee cut this account in half! They assigned the first half for last week and the second half for today. It's not right, and therefore, we're going to take up the story as a whole so you can see what's going on.

First, Jesus asked the disciples: "Who do you say that am I?" and Peter answered: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16).

Then Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it," etc. etc. (These words are written inside the dome of St. Peter's in the Vatican.)

What's going on? This is one of the most disputed texts in the New Testament. Some people will say: "It's really about Christ." Others say: "It's really about Peter's faith." And still others say: "It's really about the confession that Peter made."

When you study it, you find it's inescapable that when it says: "You are Peter" it means "You are the Rock." If you take this text and put it back into the original language that Jesus used, it's you are "Kephas" and on this "Kephas" I will build my church." There's no way to escape that. That's what it says.

Again, we ask: What is the text about? What does it do?

To get at that, let's look at Peter because that's what it's about. Remember a few chapters ago in Matthew 14, how Peter walks on the water, that is, as long as he looks at Christ, he walks on the water. But when he takes his eyes away from Christ, he sinks. In Matthew 14:30 Peter says: "Lord, help me!"

In this text for today in Matthew 16 after Peter's confession, Jesus says: "I'm going to suffer, die, and rise again." And Peter rebukes him, saying: "No, no, no."

Then Jesus rebukes him, saying: "Get behind me Satan. You are an offense, a scandal," which is also a play on the word, "rock." In other words, you are the wrong kind of rock. You are an impediment.

This highly charged exchange between Peter and Jesus in Matthew 16 is followed in Matthew 17 by the Transfiguration in which Peter, James, and John go with Jesus up the mountain, and there they have this striking mountain top sense of who Jesus is.

And not long after that, when Jesus is faced with his arrest and trial in Jerusalem, Peter denies him three times.

Then comes the crucifixion and resurrection. Although the first resurrection appearance is to one of the women, it says in Luke 24 that Peter was the first one of the official people to see Jesus.

Later on in Antioch there's conflict among the apostles, and Paul says of Peter: "I had to tell him that he had fallen away from the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:11-14). That's serious business.

So, what do we say about Peter? Although he was often the spokesman for the apostles, he's basically the typical Christian. He's with it and he's wrong. He's up and he's down. He does some things that are fine, and he also fails totally. That's the reason that we say that he is rocky, unstable, just like us. Broken, not only before the resurrection, but broken afterwards, too.

What does this account mean then for us now? It means three things.

The first one has to do with the church because it says: "On this rock I will build my church." What is that about?

Traditionally we get caught in thinking that the church is or should be visible. There are those who say that Christians around the world shouldn't be divided but they all should strive to have a unified priesthood with the Pope in Rome as its visible head and spokesman for all Christianity.

There are others who say: "No, the church is invisible, it's a matter of the heart, of my faith." Of course, the church isn't a building, but the church has to do with some kind of spiritual reality, and who knows what it is. Moreover, they say you can't depend on institutions anyway because there's a lot of corruption in churches, just as elsewhere.

What we Lutherans have said and want to say is that it's neither of these options.

The church is not visible nor invisible. It's rather hidden and revealed. The church is hidden and revealed under the cross. This is quite different than either visible or invisible.

Where is the church? At the time of the Reformation Lutherans said the church is wherever the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments administered according to the gospel.

(Augsburg Confession, Article 7: “For the true unity of the church, it is enough that the gospel is preached purely.” See also the Apology to the Augsburg Confession 7 and 8.)

The key word there is “purely.” It means to proclaim salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. It’s a way of overthrowing all authorities (a necessary priesthood, required good works, required conversion experience) that appeal to something else in addition to faith alone in Christ alone.

We know where the church is. It’s wherever the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments celebrated accordingly. That’s visible and audible.

On the other hand, it’s under the cross, and under the cross means the brokenness of this world. The brokenness which God then has taken care of, but on this side of eternity, it’s the brokenness. And so, the church is broken, and it’s only what it is through Christ.

In the second place, this account of Peter tells us something important about the Christian life. A common mistake is to think: “Well, in the Christian life God gives us a kick start in baptism, and then we better do what we should do to make it work.”

But Isaiah 64:6 reminds us that: “All our righteous deeds are filthy rags.” The Christian life is really that which the Lord accomplishes through the Holy Spirit. As the Small Catechism says: “The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, and enlightens.” And it’s not our doing.

Every day we begin again at our baptism. What happened at our baptism? The Lord made us his own totally. He didn’t give us a kick start. He made us his own. That’s very different from a kick start.

Luther put it this way: He says the Lord snatches us over against our own will, our own bent (Large Catechism 4:83). He makes us his own, and we can depend on that.

In the third place, this account of Peter says something about what it means to believe. Again, we easily get caught in modern psychology in which “believing” is something psychological that we activate within us and make happen.

Or we get caught in the idea that we go as far as we can by “believing,” but if you could have some sight, that would be better. Then we’d have something we could grab onto.

But in fact, “faith alone” is always about the promise. It’s always what God does.

We’re tempted to say: “We’re going to get beyond that,” when as a matter of fact, it’s always in him and in his promise. Of course, that’s what great about it because it’s absolutely sure and doesn’t depend on us, on how smart we are, or how sincere we are.

He does it. He makes us his own in baptism and he continues to do that. Thank God. Amen