

“Built on a Confession”

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Matthew 16: 13-20

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*For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On
God rests my deliverance and my honour; my mighty rock,
my refuge is in God. Psalm 62:5-7*

This is a funny year for all sorts of things. For some reason this summer I have more weddings and calls for weddings than I think I've had since I was a minister in a smaller community in Alberta. Many have been last-minute requests; some I've been able to do and others I've passed on to other colleagues. I'm not exactly sure why there's been an increase. Perhaps with so many churches closed there are fewer ministers presiding. Perhaps couples made plans and then thought of postponing, only to realize that this pandemic wasn't going anywhere fast.

Only one of the weddings I have this summer has been planned — and that's for Dustin and Amanda. (Amanda sings in our praise band, when we have a praise band, and Dustin works in our sound booth, when we use a sound booth!) We wish them well on their wedding day next Friday. It's not the wedding they had planned, but they have decided to make a go of it just the same, which I think is wonderful. The truth is their marriage will have ups and downs and twists and turns, so I think it says something about them as a couple that they are willing to go ahead with the wedding even though the conditions will not be perfect.

A marriage is not built on some kind of perfect wedding day, but rather on making a commitment to a relationship with each other and on confessing love to each other, surrounded by loved ones.

Our scripture reading today is found in each of the 4 gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—so that tells us it's important. It is about a confession that Peter makes. When I say confession, I don't mean telling me your sins and failings. A declaration of belief is also a confession. You can confess your love; you can confess your beliefs.

Jesus asks his disciples “Who do people say that I am?”. The disciples answer: “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or the one of the prophets.” If they'd been honest, I'm sure the disciples knew of other less positive adjectives that some people likely said about who Jesus was. Maybe the rebellious one, or the foolish one, or the dangerous one.

Then Jesus turns it to the disciples. “But who do **you** say that I am?” It was Simon Peter who spoke up and said: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*”

That was a mic drop –Boom!—kind of moment. In that moment Peter caught a glimpse of the truth and spoke it out loud: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*

That’s quite the statement to make about someone. The Messiah, the Chosen One, the one for whom Israel had been waiting to bring healing and redemption. The one who would save them. It’s important to note that Jesus did not deny it. He didn’t say: “Don’t be ridiculous Simon! I’m a good teacher but I’m not the Messiah!”

Instead Jesus *affirms it* by saying this was a divine revelation – an insight that God gave to him. *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:17-18)

Jesus affirms Peter by saying this was a revelation from heaven. Every once in a while, we are blessed with spiritual eyes to see what is true and good all around us. I believe part of our task as humans in this life, and especially as Christians, is to develop eyes that can see and ears that can hear the hope and the love of God that is all around us, from the cradle to the grave and ever after.

When Jesus said “On this rock I will build my church”, he wasn’t just talking about Peter himself, who would later become the leader of the apostles; he was also speaking about Peter’s confession. The church is built on people, very flawed people, but even more on the foundation of a conviction and a confession.

This happens before the resurrection. Peter doesn’t have empirical evidence that Jesus is the messiah, he has a glimpse, an aha! moment, rooted not so much in his head as in his gut and in his soul. Even though there is no way he could be 100% sure, Peter has enough to go on to make a confession and a commitment.

It seems to me that making a commitment is out of style today. It used to be that you joined a church or an organization like the Lions Club or something and you made a commitment to that organization to serve it and to make a difference. Of course, even the number of people who get married and make a life-long commitment to each other is down – so many move quickly to living together for financial reasons but they don’t get around to making a commitment.

When you commit to being together and you confess your love for the other person, it is only the beginning of the relationship.

When I said ‘I do’ or actually ‘I will ’at the front of this church 25 years ago, I had no idea what the next 25 years would be like. I had no idea what I was getting into. I just knew that this guy named Alex was a good guy and he liked me a lot and I liked him a lot and so we decided to commit to teaming up together for life. I knew just enough to take a leap of faith!

What does that really have to do with faith? Well I think it’s similar. When we make a confession of faith we are committing to a relationship. So many people want to see and understand —they want to control the whole picture of faith before they will commit to something. But that’s not how it works.

Yes I acknowledge that there are so many different religions, and even within Christianity there are so many different denominations and even within a denomination there are so many different flavours ... so how could a person possibly make a statement about what they believe?

My father used to say that it is like being at the foot of a mountain and wanting to climb to the top. There seem to be so many different paths to the top and you're not sure what is on each of the paths, or even if they all lead to the top or not. You can spend a lifetime at the bottom circling around the mountain trying to decide whether or not to try a path, and if so, which one! I can't speak for the paths that many different religions and denominations are on. I suspect that many do make it to the top and can offer a genuine experience of God. I suspect, but I don't know for sure.

The only path I can speak to is the path that I have committed to, the path of Jesus. On this path I have found a depth of relationship that is hard to describe.

I have found:

- The joy of God's presence and a sense that I am known and loved with all my imperfections.
- I have found solid ground under me or a hand pulling me up when I feel like I'm sinking.
- I have heard whispered words of encouragement to keep me taking one more step forward on this often weary and tiring life.
- I have found faith for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

You can find these things accidentally – without making any commitment — no doubt about it. But if you regularly want that hope, that encouragement, that sense of God's presence and God's calling in your life, then it begins with taking a stand and making a commitment even before you know everything there is to know.

Who do you say that I am? I want to encourage you to answer that. Who do you say that Jesus is to you? I don't want you to tell me, I want you to imagine Jesus asking you that question. I'd like you to answer him. I encourage you to write it down or speak it out loud. Now what are you going to do about that statement? Will you make a decision to follow and to walk with Jesus on this path of life?

I dearly wish we could be together to commit or re-commit ourselves to following Jesus together because this is what the church is built on: a commitment to entering into a transforming relationship with Jesus and with one another. This kind of church built on that rock of faith will survive any pandemic, illness or insecurity. This kind of church brings life and hope and can change the world.

Thanks be to God.