

Who Am I?

So last week we had some fun with our Roman Catholic siblings, who like to see themselves as the one true church.

Today, I suppose I'm getting my comeuppance, given today's gospel lesson, with Jesus, bestowing upon Peter, the title of "the rock" upon which Jesus shall build his church.

But before we get too carried away with any of this, let's remember where and how this conversation between Jesus and Peter took place.

It's a conversation between Jesus and the disciples.

Maybe just twelve of them sitting under the cooling shade of a large tree.

Which would be a most appropriate place for this conversation, since it reflects the story of the mustard seed.

The tiny seed that grows into a large tree, capable of sheltering many.

As 12 ordinary working class folks become the seeds for the church of Christ that now blossoms around the world.

Today's story is also an important reminder that the church is not a building, but a gathering of the community.

On Maui, tragically, so many buildings were completely destroyed.

But the church, the community, is not only alive, but is perhaps stronger and more deeply faithful than ever.

Because loss has a way of plowing the ground and uprooting our comfortable lives.

Yet with all the pain and disruption that comes from such plowing, the soil is prepared for something new to grow.

Who knows but in Maui, the centuries-old conflict over water rights and water access might finally be resolved in a way more just for the indigenous people.

It's no small irony that when the first Europeans arrived, Lahaina was called the Venice of the Pacific.

For those who don't know about Venice, it's a city with canals running through it, and people go about on small boats.

Back in the day, Lahaina too was rich with fresh water.

That all changed when colonizers came and began planting cash crops of pineapple and sugarcane.

Vast amounts of water were diverted to those moneymaking ventures.

Resulting in tremendous conflict over who shall receive and who shall be denied the priceless benefit of water supplies on Maui.

Perhaps this tragedy will reset the table in a way more favorable to the native peoples.

And then again, perhaps not.

Our way forward, as we develop spiritually, morally and socially, is so very often marked by two steps forward and at least one step back.

Christ's church is no different.

And so it is most appropriate that the community that Jesus formally sets in motion this morning is a community founded upon a man with clay feet.

And that is perhaps one of the most important insights that any Christian can ever embrace.

Recognizing that not only Peter, but we all of us, have feet of clay is not only recognizing undeniable facts, but it's a recognition crucial to maintaining a sense of humility and balance as we navigate the various paths of our lives.

In our modern world filled with social media, instant judgments made on inaccurate facts, partisan scrutiny of the smallest foibles of our perceived enemies and an increasing trend of breaking into groups pitting "us against them", remembering our clay feet can help reduce the temperature in the room.

It can give us the pause necessary to walk a bit in the other gal's shoes.

It can slow us down before we speak, judge, condemn.

Clay feet remind us that the central task of any follower of Christ is to love and serve, as we carry out our faith.

So I am most grateful that the very rock upon which Christ's Church is built is on a rock full of doubt and fear and indecision.

After all, Peter, not only got out of the boat to walk on the rough waters, he also sank very quickly

Peter not only bravely promised to stand with Jesus until the last, but he also betrayed him three times.

Even at the end of his days, as he feared for his life in Rome, Jesus himself appeared to Peter as Peter scurried out of Rome, and told him to go back and accept his martyrdom.

How many of us have faith similar to Peter's?

Lots of doubts, lots of good intentions, lots of fears, and ultimately, hopefully, a willingness to carry-on, one more day.

And there is this.

If Jesus IS King, he's King of the whole world!

Not just in our private lives, but in our public lives too!

Paul understands this when he appeals "to you brothers and sisters, ..., to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..."

Meaning, that the powers of this world stay in power because they use the threat of death to keep people in line.

That's why the Romans crucified troublemakers.

It's why the state still retains the power to legally execute a person.

The powers of this world think they are in charge of the power of death.

But if Jesus, the resurrected one, the one who defeats death, is King of the world, then those who follow Jesus are freed from that power — and can fearlessly confront those who constantly seek to subvert God's call to unity, compassion and kindness.

We can live and challenge and serve and protest and preach — fearlessly — because death is done with!

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes this very kind of freedom as he is sent to the bitter cold prison camp in Siberia:

"From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you.

At the very threshold, you must say to yourself, 'My life is over, a little early, to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it.

I am condemned to die -- now or a little later. . .'

Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator trembles.

Only the man who renounces everything wins the victory."

Because Jesus is King, we slowly come to embrace the truth that:

"Violence cannot defeat violence.

Hate cannot defeat hate.

Fear cannot defeat fear.

We come to grasp the magnificent truth that God achieves victory through defeat.

Glory through shame.

Strength through weakness.

Leadership through serving.

Life through death.

These aren't truths that are grasped easily — or without much struggle." McClaren, paraphrased.

Not for Peter.

Not for us.

But with the challenge to take up this new way comes a new kind of power.

Jesus says today that what we bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and what we loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

We last heard these words at Pentecost, when Jesus gives to us the power to bind and loose sins, a power we can only truly exercise if our standpoint is on the solid rock of forgiveness, which alone allows us to distinguish the good from the bad and the ugly.

Today, when Jesus speaks of the power to bind and loose; he's not talking so much about sins as about the rules of the faith community.

Just as Jesus reinterprets the rules of the faith community, not through rigid legalisms, but with the eyes of compassion, so he instructs us to do likewise.

It seems what Jesus is telling us is that no church rule is unchangeable – because the living God is with us and among us every single day.

And because the power of the living God is here in our midst, always and forever, all rules are subject to change if that change serves human need.

It's as if Jesus is saying, "don't use religious rules to determine what love means, use love to determine what religious rules mean."

Today we stand with the apostles in the company of King Jesus.

And as we stand there with them, the question posed to each of us is this:

How shall we engage with the trials and tribulations of our world?

Shall it be from a place of dominance and privilege?

Or shall it be with quiet words of understanding – with warm gestures of compassion?

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