

Matthew 16:13-20

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I have lived in the same house in Northeast Portland, on Alameda Ridge, since 1992. Geologically, the Ridge is a giant gravel bar, created as rocks dropped out of the floodwaters as they swirled around [Rocky Butte](#), centuries ago. The land upon which my house is built is gravelly. Knowing that at some point there is likely to be a big earthquake in our area, I had the house bolted to the foundation. We know the importance of a sure foundation. We attempt security.

We find security in safe, and defined places, in steadiness. Today, we are invited to think about what it means to be church, and upon what are we grounded? What does it mean that Jesus identifies a living person—Peter—as the foundation of the church? What does that mean? How does this change our view of church?

Some of our most beloved hymns emphasize the strong foundation: “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, and “How Firm A Foundation.” We know our faith needs a solid foundation. But, over my years as pastor, I wonder sometimes if the rock image, may be closer to illustrating stony resistance to change. Resistance to change is particularly intensified in groups of people, like churches, denominations and other institutions. A professor friend of mine, has a saying: “Change is constant; growth is optional.” For mainline churches, as we see congregations age, and membership decline, and as long-time beloved ones are no longer able to be present in worship with us, we may feel at times that the foundation is gravelly, and crumbling.

Each week in our staff team meeting, we read and study the scripture for the upcoming Sunday. This week, Kyler reminded us of the tomb of St. Peter in the Vatican. The opulence of that tomb is unforgettable. It’s a memorial in marble and gold. The splendor is meant to memorialize the saint of the church. But, when Jesus spoke of petros (Peter, meaning small stone) and petras (meaning rock), I don’t believe he was talking about a physical entity at all. The foundation that Jesus was calling attention to is the foundation of God’s love, living in a human being.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, there is a long history of people who consider themselves “spiritual, but not religious.” Many people who live here have no church background and the word “church” does not have positive associations. Yes Christian history is rife with examples of the sins in the institution of church: the Crusades, alignment with sexism, homophobia, and white supremacy. But Jesus’ message to Peter is this: “You are Peter, and in you, I’ll build my church. My understanding of this is that because Peter recognized saw the Spirit and power of God in Jesus; because he recognized Jesus as the anointed one, the Messiah; even though Peter was a sometimes flawed and sometimes heroic man, he became the channel for God’s Spirit and love. Jesus was saying: “Upon the love and Spirit in you, Peter, I’m building my church.”

And the gates of Hades, that pagan underworld, the land of the lifeless, and lost, the disconnected, the hopeless who were living in the oppression of the Roman Empire—that would

not prevail against the church. Christ's church is built upon the living rock: Peter, and all who will see God's presence, shining in the other.

I think it's important to remember that "church" really isn't about the material things. It's not location, buildings, documents, candles, or vestments. It's about the peace of Christ that unites us, and the Holy Spirit that moves us always into new life. Think about that for a moment.

What is St. Andrew without its building? Without its address at 12405 SW Butner Road? Without building, or Sanctuary of the Firs? Without piano or organ, without its libraries, fellowship hall? Without meeting minutes and documents?

Here's what I think of as St. Andrew church: it is our kind relationship to one another, to God, to neighbors, to earth; it's living in forbearance and forgiveness together; it's our relationship to the families from Afghanistan; it's playing and teaching the children. Church is the gathering of supplies for Lutheran World Relief. It is the stories shared while people work on planting flowers, weeding, and tending the grounds. It's the laughter and wisdom shared over a cup of coffee. Church is the way we see Christ in one another when we are breaking bread in dinner groups, in teaching, in sharing of our lives, in our pray concerns and joys.

I recently heard someone mention that white nationalism has so infected some churches now, that there is more need than ever for Christians who will speak out against transphobia. Who will aspire to be anti-racist. We need to speak up for full inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, and for the care of the earth. To welcome immigrants and the poor. Though, like Peter, we are human, and we sometimes fail. Though our institutions fall short, we can trust God's Spirit to multiple our efforts. Christ's church is built upon living rock. But like all things living, there will be change.

One of my mentors, the Rev. Jim Petersen noted in a sermon, years ago, that the jokes about St. Peter at the Gates of Heaven—always have story line that involves someone needing to pass muster to get in. They have to answer a question, or pass a test for Peter to unlock the gates.

Jim said that he always imagined Jesus, at those locked gates, with shovel, digging holes and constantly pulling people in!

Remember that after Jesus' resurrection, at first, Mary did not recognize him at the open tomb. The disciples on the road to Emmaus spoke with Jesus and did not recognize him until they had shared a meal together. I believe this interim time is a season for us to see with new eyes.

Haven't we already experienced some of this: Jesus meeting us in new people? In new experiences?

Many of you were at the ice cream social here ,yesterday. We counted over one hundred people. It was a lot of fun. I also had fun leading up to the event. Carol Harker had made these clever doorknob flyers to take around to the neighborhood. Last week, I walked around, hanging them on front doorknobs. One man was outside his house, building an access to his basement. I'm actually an introvert, more comfortable with putting a flyer on a door, rather than meeting a stranger, face to face. But, I caught his eye, and asked if he'd like an invitation to an ice cream

social.

He held out his hand for the invitation, and said, “My name is Tray. Thanks!” I said, “I’m Laurie, and the pastor of St. Andrew church, that church right there at the corner.” Suddenly, I had a lot more energy and boldness for the job. I decided to forgo the doorknobs and hand out flyers to people as I walked around the lake. That way, I could focus on face to face connections.

As I circled the lake, I handed out about 35 flyers to people of all ages: parents and grandparents pushing strollers; people fishing; some people who looked to be of Scandinavian and European descent, and some people of Latin, middle Eastern and African descent; kids on bikes, roller skaters, older people, walking slowly. And many people walking their dogs. . .

Its true that a couple of people avoided me. And one forcefully said “NO” as I offered a flyer, not even hearing my greeting. But the most common reaction was a smiling curiosity. “Where?” they asked me. “That big church on the corner.” “The one with Tai Chi?” “Yes, we just want to get to know you, our neighbors.”

And then, there was the young father, with kids on the playground. His halting English made me pause to understand. He was watching his three little boys, climbing on the slide. When I explained that I was a pastor from the church, his voice got shaking and his eyes teared up. “I need to go to church” he said. “You are always welcome with us. . . 9:30 on Sundays, and we have a nursery.” We connected in a human, and important way in the short conversation.

The church is built upon our loving kindness for one another, and in the ways we live it out, every day. Changes happen. Generations pass. In the years to come, there will be much that we don’t anticipate or can even imagine. But, we can count on the love of God to be the foundation for our church.

May the peace of Christ be with us all.