

Pentecost 13 8/23/26
Matthew 16:13-20 16A

"AND I TELL YOU, YOU ARE PETER, AND ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH, AND THE GATES OF HELL SHALL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT."

Cyclospora. It sounds strange, but it's nothing to take lightly. Cyclospora is the official name of the parasite that caused the outbreak out this summer, making thousands sick across 17 states. And the strange but true thing is that it was spread chiefly through infected lettuce. Cyclospora made people shy not only away from lettuce, but other produce as well.

I say strange but true because lettuce, like all produce, is supposed to be good for you. But cyclospora made something that was supposed to be good and made it bad.

My Dear Friends in Christ, I call this to your attention because we are creatures who like certainty. We want certainty in our lives. We want to be certain that the lettuce and all the food we buy will not only taste great, but that it won't make us sick. We want to be certain that the airplane we board will get us safely to our destination. We want to be certain that the doctor will give us the medical care that will make us well. We want to be certain that our family and friends will be there for us in good times and in bad. We want absolute certainty. We want life to be rock solid. We want no doubt that we're getting what we're paying for and that we can depend on our friends and loved ones. Period.

Especially, when it comes to our faith, we want to be absolutely certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that we have a God who loves us and who will take care of us. We want to know that we can come to Him when

we need His help. We want Him to be a rock for us -- solid and unshakeable.

Which brings us to our Gospel for today. There was uncertainty about who the Son of Man really is. Matthew uses that title for Jesus often in his Gospel. This Son of Man is also, as we confess in the Creed, “God of God...very God of very God,” God Himself, in the flesh (Nicene Creed). But, there was uncertainty among the people about who Jesus was. Yes, they saw the miracles Jesus did and were awed, fascinated, by them, perhaps even benefited directly from them. But, they misunderstood them. The chief reason Jesus did miracles was to prove that He was very God of very God; yes, He alleviated suffering and removed the curse of sin, but mainly miracles were a witness that was indeed God-in-the-flesh, the promised Messiah, because only God could do what He did. But, the people were missing the point. They didn’t care about a Savior from sin, death, and hell; they wanted a magic genie, a goose to lay the golden egg. That’s how they saw Jesus, someone to give them whatever their belly desired.

Did the disciples know? They were Jesus hand-picked men to continue His work after His ascension. Were they buying into the thinking of the masses and seeing Jesus as nothing more than a magician capable of great sleight of hand or did they understand He was God-in-the-flesh? So, He asked them. He asked them point-blank, “*But who do you say that I am*” (v. 15)? Simon answered, not for himself alone but for his eleven fellow disciples as well, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (v. 16).

Jesus praised Simon for his confession of faith, not because this came from his reason or senses, but because God had revealed the

identity of Jesus Christ to him. Jesus gave Simon the name "Peter," which means "rock." Jesus then said, "*On this rock I will build my church*" (v. 18). Which may sound a little confusing, but it's really not. Jesus was not building His Church on the man Simon Peter. Rather, Jesus builds His Church upon Peter's confession. The truth that Jesus is the Son of God is the foundation of Christ's Church.

Peter's confession is the church's confession. We made this same confession a few moments ago, with the words of the Apostles' Creed, as we with one voice, with Christians around the world and the angels, arch-angels, and all the company of heaven confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of living God. Back in my seminary days, one of our professors taught us the sum and summary of the Christian faith: All theology is Christology. Jesus is not a magic genie, the goose to give us the golden egg, our life coach, or our financial guru. He's our Savior. He is true God and true man, who redeemed us from sin, death, and the power of the devil "not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death that I may be His own" (2nd Article).

We have the certainty of knowing that Jesus is our Rock, for He cannot be shaken. But, the same cannot be said of us. We are fickle. We are sheep who love to wonder. Do you remember our Gospel from a few Sundays ago? Jesus came to the disciples as the wind and waves threatened to sink their boat. Peter got out of the boat and began to walk to Jesus. As long as he kept his eyes fixed on Jesus, he was fine. But, he took his eyes off Jesus to look at the water and waves, and he was afraid and began to sink. So many things take our eyes off Jesus: our health, our finances, this fall's harvest, the well-being of our friends and loved ones, going back to school, our future. We are troubled by many things. We

have faith in the Rock of Ages, but we become so easily distracted by the pebbles. And, our lives are filled with uncertainty. Is God stronger than this cross that is crushing me? Is God hearing my begging, my cries for help? Does God care?

Often, it seems the littlest things in our path will take our eyes off Jesus. When we follow in the footsteps of Peter to take our eyes off Jesus, we are without a foundation. Without the Rock Jesus, we have no foundation, all else is sinking sand, and we sink in our sins, especially our sin of not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things.

There has long been a philosophical question asked about God. Maybe you've heard it: Is there a rock so big that God cannot lift it? There *is* an answer to this question: God lifted the greatest Rock of all when he lifted up His Son on the cross to give His body and shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus, our Rock, bled from the whipping, the crown of thorns, and the nails and then died in our place, to take our sins away. God lifted this same Rock by raising Him from the dead so that we would be raised from the grave. This Rock was lifted up on the cross to die for us, raised from the tomb, and has ascended into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of the Father to make intercession – to literally pray – for us.

Some of you may remember when Prudential Insurance used as its logo an image of the Rock of Gibraltar, to give its clients the comfort of knowing their policies and investments are safe, stable, and secure -- rock solid. Its slogan was "Get a Piece of the Rock."

One could say the same thing here in the Church, BUT here we don't come to get a piece of the Rock, we get the Rock Himself. Jesus gives Himself completely to us. We have received total forgiveness of our sins in

the Absolution. We receive it again as His Word is read and preached in our hearing. In a few minutes, this Rock will again come down to earth, to be present with His body and blood in the bread and wine, as He gives us His Supper for the forgiveness of our sins, for eternal life, for salvation – and, for the strengthening of the foundation of our faith. These are God's rock-solid guarantees and promises; the means through which He gives us the certainty of Christ. Through His Word and Sacraments, our Lord casts out our worry, our fear, our uncertainty itself. He takes us weak-kneed pieces of clay and molds us into His own image, that we may be strong -- strong in Him.

God gives us the Rock of Christ, that we may have certainty of knowing that He has crushed all the curse of sin, even our greatest enemy, death itself. In faith we cry, "On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground in sinking sand."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.