

SERMON- Proper 16 (A)
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Good Shepherd (Livestream)
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Isaiah 51:1-6 ——— Psalm 138

Matthew 16:13-20

*(Jesus said) “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”
I speak to you in the NAME of the FATHER, and the SON, and the HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN*

OPENING:

The verse that I just quoted, Matthew 16:18, is perhaps one of the most important bit of Scripture in the Roman Catholic tradition, as Jesus’ reply to Peter’s Confession has been the basis for the authority of the pope and that of the Church through the centuries.¹

If that’s one of the most important bits of scripture in the Roman Catholic tradition, it’s interesting to ask ourselves:

“what is the most important piece of scripture for us as Episcopalians?”

Now that sort of question has its limits.

It’s an impossible task to reduce one’s faith to one line, there are no right or wrong answers. My guess is that there would probably be, as an answer to that question, in a group of 40 Episcopalians, 40 or so different lines of scripture... but I think it’s a healthy exercise to try... say, when you encounter a long traffic light, or you get stuck in an elevator somewhere.

OR maybe when you are in virtual coffee hour.

We have already done our favorite parable, our favorite miracle, so now, today 11:15am: “What is your favorite verse/ passage in the Bible?”

SCRIPTURE

My guess is that there will be a few from the Beatitudes, or something else from the Sermon on the Mount, or maybe Jesus’ Great Commandment.

For the large bulk of American Christianity, it would be **John 3.16**: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever should believe in him, should not perish but have everlasting life.*

¹ For example, see Michael H. Crosby, “Matthew’s Gospel- Jesus’ Call to Discipleship” in Ringe, Sharon H., and Wes Howard-Brook. 2002, eds. *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 19. Or Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe “Theological Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2008. *Feasting on the Word- Year A. (Volume 3)* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 382.

(I remember having to memorize that verse, at Vacation Bible School, at Culpeper Baptist Church, one summer when I was eight years old.)

According to one survey by **Bible Gateway**, the popular online Scripture website, the most read Bible verses in 2019, with over 2 billion views, was indeed John 3.16, with Psalm 23 and Genesis 1.1 trailing behind.²

So now we have covered the Roman Catholic Church and the more Protestant tradition...

What about us as Episcopalians, in the so-called *via media*, the “middle way”? What would our favorite be?

Or, maybe more helpfully, Peter has made *his* confession.

What would *ours* sound like?

What would the testimony of our Church, the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus movement, emphasize?

LOVE

I think **I** would start by quoting our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, who often says: “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.”

That line is unfortunately not in the Bible exactly, but the theme is.³

He is not talking about romantic love, but the overwhelming sense of God’s presence oriented around the urge for salvation, rescue, and new creation.

I would venture then that that emphasis allows Episcopalians to look at the world in a positive and hopeful way. Our role, as individuals and the church, then is to model that love, to embody God’s reign, and to be beacons of God’s grace.

Peter famously, in our Gospel passage, is handed the keys to the kingdom.

But there needs to be a bit of a reversal of that image/ caricature of Peter at the pearly gates.

That image is usually associated with judgement and accounting.

We are like the disciples who say in the parable: “Tell us about the weeds!”⁴

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/year-in-review/2019/>

³ <https://episcopalchurch.org/presiding-bishop-michael-curry>; 1 John 4. 16.

⁴ Matthew 13.36.

What if instead, the granting of those keys means that we, the Church, are entrusted with the remarkable responsibility: to show God's love, to share God's plenty, to feed the 5000, and to heal the sick, to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

So Peter is not primarily the gatekeeper, the guardian, but rather the one whose "joyful task (is) to lead" us through the gates, with those keys, into the kingdom of God, on earth and in heaven.⁵

CONFLICT

So far so good, but our tradition also understands that it's not all fluffy clouds and harps playing.

There is conflict and difficulty in the world, and absolutely in the church.

To quote another Bishop, this time going further up our hierarchy to the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey:

"(The Anglican Church's) credentials are its incompleteness, with the tension and travail in its soul. It is clumsy and untidy; it baffles neatness and logic. For it is sent not to commend itself as the 'best type of Christianity,' but by its very brokenness to point to the universal Church wherein all have died."⁶

So, in the Episcopal/ Anglican church, there is also an emphasis on the reality that we have not figured it all out, that we are not perfect, you will have to learn how to live with the gray, rather than with the black or white.

PETER

Who embodies that sort of duality better than Peter himself? Who but the chief disciple is a better example of humanity's capability and sinfulness?

Think again about those keys, the symbol commonly associated with St. Peter, the first Bishop of Rome. There are churches named "St. Peter's" in Eastern Europe, that apparently, after the Reformation, had a Rooster painted on the back of the church to go with the Keys on the front.

This was to symbolize, of course, the reality that Peter is not only God's vicar here on earth, but also the one who apostatized, who denied Christ in his moment of greatness need, as the cock crowed.

⁵ Hare, Douglas R. A. 2009. *Matthew*. (Interpretation Series) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 191

⁶ <http://www.episcopalchurchsc.org/messages-from-bishop-adams/church-unity-from-the-bishop-archdeacon>

What better symbol for the church! What better for us as human beings! There is no one better than the one who confessed Jesus here in this stunning triumph, but who also, in the very next passage (which we will hear next week), is rebuked by Jesus, when he says “Get Behind me Satan.”⁷

CONCLUSION

That’s a nerve-wracking proposition, to realize that the church is fallible, utterly human, no worse or better than a stubborn fisherman-turned-rabbi of the 1st century.

The imagery with the keys is again helpful in one final emphasis.

Imagine if Jesus hands over the keys to Peter in a way not unlike the way a parent hands off keys to their teenager to drive for the 1st time. They are not so much keys to the gates, but keys to the vehicle that give us the power and freedom to do good and ill here on earth.

God knows, with that bestowing of power, that there is much danger and anxiety, but also great possibility and hope.

Ultimately: “The church is as fragile or as strong as each of us. The church exists daily in this tension of power and powerlessness.”⁸

2000 years later, we as a Church, are still teenagers, still growing into our identity, still trying to figure ourselves as we change as fast as the world changes around us.

Admittedly, I have been emphasizing so much of our tradition that is such a blessing to us, and a gift to the larger Church. TO be sure, like any teenager, there is a lot about us that is embarrassing, that we would like to change, and wrong.

Still I will end on a note of hope, and by quoting a bit of a Scripture from our passage that it very ‘unEpiscopalian’ and not very popular, anywhere.

Jesus famously tells says ‘You are the rock and here are the keys’... AND he also says: “*and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*”⁹

That is our great hope and assurance for us and for all who confess Christ. **AMEN.**

⁷ Matthew 16.23; Günther Bornkamm “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and Loose’ in the Church in Matthew’s Gospel- The Problem of Sources in Matthew’s Gospel” in Stanton, Graham, ed. 1995. *The Interpretation of Matthew*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 110; Gundry, Robert H. 1994. 2nd ed. *Matthew: a Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 331, 334.

⁸ Jim S. Kim, “Pastoral Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2008. *Feasting on the Word- Year A. (Volume 3)* Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 380, 384.

⁹ Matthew 16.18