

HOPE IS BUILT ON THE ROCK

Matthew 16: 23-30

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Do you know who I am? The NRSV version of the Bible actually puts it this way: *“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”* Jesus’ identity as the Messiah was important for the disciples to know – not just on a cerebral level, but on a heart level. In other words, Jesus was looking for a profession of faith from his disciples, and he got one! Peter’s spontaneous declaration was what Jesus was hoping to hear: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God (verse 16)!”*

Blessed are you! Jesus affirms Peter and says that he did not get this information about Jesus’ identity from books or from teachers, but from God himself who let Peter in on the secret. Now because Peter has said this, Jesus tells Peter who Peter really is: *“And I tell you, and you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (Hell) will not prevail against it (verse 18)!”* Peter is a rock, not because of his own strength, but because of Christ strengthening Peter, making him strong and courageous. Blessed are you Peter, because you have identified who the Messiah is in your life! Peter did not quite understand the whole nature of his Messiah, but he was getting closer.

Christ builds his church through ordinary people. Author and theologian Eugene Peterson makes the point that the identification of Peter as the Rock on which the church is built seems so unlikely because we know the volatility of Peter. Furthermore, Peter was an uneducated fisherman, yet he was chosen as a rabbi’s (Jesus) disciple, which would not have normally happened at that time. Even Jesus himself was a very common person in society, coming from Nazareth; a working class man; an ordinary carpenter’s son; was viewed as an unlikely candidate to reveal God to others.

Simon Peter was basically the poorest choice Jesus could have made for building up the new community of faith. That was probably the reason Jesus chose him – so that none of us would feel we were unworthy or not enough. If Peter was a good fit for the foundation of his church, certainly there is a place for us to fit as well.

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven (verse 19a)”. Keys have been important unlocking mechanisms for thousands of years. Keys are actually quite powerful objects. The other day my son Nico was in town with our neighbour’s pickup, and locked the keys in the truck while it was running (the same thing happened to my neighbour a few months ago). Nico called me, I called the neighbour, but there was no answer. I went to my neighbour’s house,

and he actually was home to give me the other set of keys to rescue Nico. The keys unlocked the barrier for Nico to have the freedom to drive the truck back home.

Jesus gives us the keys of the kingdom of heaven to unlock barriers. We read in verse 19 that “whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” can mean those things that bind or the ‘no’ of earth (for example, living only for oneself, and not for one’s neighbor) does not have lasting, eternal value. However, the ‘yes’ (whatever you loose on earth) are those actions which emulate Jesus, bringing healing and restoration to the world. This kind of living has positive physical, spiritual and eternal or in other words, “heaven” ramifications. This ‘yes’ kind of living is in line with the power of God, and is the key that opens the doors to abundant life for the world.

The concept of the ‘Priesthood of all believers’ was one of three basic notions brought forward at the reformation. The first two notions are ‘Sola Scriptura’ (which states the sole authority of scripture) and ‘Sola Fide’ (justification by faith alone). The third is ‘The Priesthood of all believers’. The Priesthood of all Believers notion says that we all have the opportunity to handle the keys of the kingdom and be priests for God’s kingdom. This means that whatever your occupation and/or station in life, the spirit works through you to be the rock on which to build his church and advance God’s kingdom. If Peter could do it, so can you. But to move forward with this, it is important to follow Jesus example of laying down one’s life for others.

Losing and gaining our lives. An excerpt from Henri Nouwen’s book “Bread for the Journey” states that the great paradox of life is that people who lose their lives will indeed gain them. This paradox becomes clear in very ordinary situations. If we cling to our friends, we may lose them. However, when we are non-possessive in our relationships, we will draw people towards us. When we seek and desire fame, it often disappears as soon as we have it, but when we have no need to be known, we may be remembered long after we died. When we want to be in the center of attention, we often end up on the margins, but when we are free to live as we are meant to, we may find ourselves in the center.

Giving away our lives for the sake of others is the greatest of all human arts. This will gain us our lives in Christ’s Kingdom. Amen.