

A Wobby Rock

[Matthew 16:13-20]

"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

K Karpen, Sunday, August 21, 2005
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

[Matthew 16:13-20 , "A Wobbly Rock," K Karpen, Sunday, August 21, 2005]

Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah...And I tell you, you are Peter; and on this rock I will build my church.

I'd like us to think together for a little while about the nature of faith, what it is and what it isn't. And who better to help us along in the exploration of our own faith or lack of it than the guy whose rocky faith in Jesus and in the God of Jesus won him a special place in the heart of Jesus: everybody's favorite disciple, Simon Peter!

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus' affection for Simon Peter is so obvious, so exuberant, so over the top, you almost forget that a chapter or so ago he was calling Peter "you of little faith." Jesus seems genuinely moved by the faith Simon has in him. So moved, he gives him a new name: Peter. Petros. Greek for stone. Rock. It's where we get the English word "petrified;" turned to stone. It's not a bad name. It's not a name at all. Or it wasn't until this moment in Caesarea Philippi.

But he begins from this time forward to call him Peter, and it's clear that this new nickname is a sign of affection, a term of endearment. It's so much nicer than the one Jesus comes up with 5 verses later, when Peter, emboldened by his new status as the rock of the church, reacts to some bad news from Jesus—that Jesus must go to Jerusalem and go through a lot of suffering and be killed—with the cocky, perky, upbeat response, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

There, Jesus comes up with yet another nickname; he's like George Bush in that one way anyway. There, Jesus calls him what? Satan. I'm not completely sure how Peter felt about being called "Rock." But it's a whole lot nicer than being called "Satan."

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"Blessed are you...God has revealed things to you. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." There are 4 things we can learn about faith from these 2 verses.

1. Faith is a blessing, as well as a curse.
2. Faith is a gift, not something we figure out.
3. Faith brings with it a new identity.
4. Faith brings with it a new responsibility.

It's like the old Gospel song about name-changing. "I told Jesus it would be alright if he changed my name. Jesus told me that the world would turn 'gainst me if he changed my name. But... Jesus told me that I'd have to work for justice if he changed my name. But..."

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Before we think any more about what faith is, let's think about what it isn't. Faith is not blind assent to a series of propositions about God, Jesus or anything else. The acceptance of doctrines, be they true or false. Something you need to convince yourself or anybody else of.

Faith is trust. Pure and simple. Who do you trust? Where do you put your trust? Bill Coffin said it best: Faith is not believing without proof, but trusting without reservation. And for all his ups and downs, Peter knows whom to trust. In that way, he's a rock. OK, he's a wobbly rock. But he's a rock. He feels the weight of responsibility. But he's a rock. He's a bit petrified. But he's a rock. He feels a sense of power and possibility, not only from his faith, but from Jesus' faith in him.

It reminds me of the old adage about God's love. It doesn't seek value; it creates value. It doesn't seek value; if it did I think it would have sought someone other than Peter, bless his heart. It creates value.

Look at the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, whom the love and compassion transforms into women who can subvert the will of Pharaoh, the strongest person on the planet, just with the power of love.

I had a friend at seminary who was so inspired by their story, she re-named her cats Shiphrah and Puah. It's what people in seminary do. I don't know if those cats were inspired by their name-change to do courageous & powerful things. But I know that every time I heard my friend out in the hallway calling out "Shiphrah, Puah," it reminded me of what the love of the one God makes possible.

And I continue to be inspired and moved by modern-day Shiphrahs & Puahs who take their cause & calling seriously, who make peace & work for justice to be not conformed to this world.

Friends, this story of Simon renamed Peter reminds us of what faith is, and what it's not. It's a gift. It's a blessing, but not always. It's a gift that requires giving. Faith gives us a new identity. New friends & maybe new enemies. Mostly, faith—trust in the living God—changes the way we live our whole lives. "I told Jesus it would be alright. Jesus told me that the world would turn against me. But Jesus told me that I'd have to work for justice. Jesus told me I'd have to outswim Pharaoh's army."