

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mt. 16:13-20; Rom. 12:1-8

August 27, 2017
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Rocks and Pebbles

It is almost two years, now, since Anthony Acheson's last Sunday as your pastor, at Greensboro United Church of Christ. This past Sunday, the Pastoral Search Committee brought you the exciting news that they have a candidate to recommend to be your new settled pastor. Plans are afoot to meet and greet the candidate, and to hear him preach and lead worship, on the weekend of September 23rd and 24th. I hope that as many of you as possible will be here for this important event, ready to welcome the candidate and his wife, to listen, to ask questions, and to discern if this is the one God is calling to be your next settled pastor.

It may seem that two years is a long time between settled pastors, but there is important work to be done in the interim time. The situation of a congregation, following the loss of a long-term pastor, has been compared to that of someone whose long-time spouse or partner has died. For years, the one who is bereaved has defined themselves as part of a "we." Now they have the daunting task of figuring out who they are as an "I." We've heard the stories (less common in these days of more flexible gender roles) of widows who don't know how to write a check, because the husband always paid the bills, or widowers who don't know how to run the washing machine, because the wife always did the laundry. It can be hard for the surviving partner to sort out who they are and how they want to live in this strange new world of being on their own.

Sorting out who you are, as a congregation, and how you want to move forward are two of the most important tasks of an interim time. At the beginning of the transitional time, it can feel as if you are wandering in the wilderness, like the People of Israel after the exodus. But there was a reason it took the People of Israel forty years to go the fairly short distance from Egypt to Palestine. In Israel, they had been slaves with no control over their identity and purpose. Once they escaped from Egypt, they needed time to discover who they were, time to forge a new identity as a cohesive people, and time for leaders to emerge from among them who could lead them on the next phase of their journey.

Now, I'm not saying that you were like slaves under Anthony's leadership. But a long-term settled pastor tends to play a leading role in how, and whether, you define your identity and set your priorities. Over the past almost two years, you have participated willingly and even enthusiastically, in the work of defining anew you identity and purpose. While I led and, perhaps at times, pushed you in this effort, the defining characteristics, hopes, and dreams, and commitments came from you. You are not the same congregation you were two years ago, and I hope you will continue to be bold in exploring, and living into, your redefined identity and purpose as you create a new partnership in ministry with your next settled pastor.

With this in mind, let's turn to our gospel reading. This passage comes at what is often called the turning point of Matthew's account. It is at this point that Jesus turns *away* from his ministry,

in and around Galilee, and *toward* Jerusalem and his death. The scene hinges on the disciples' recognition of who Jesus is, and Matthew gives the leading role in this recognition to Simon Peter. Jesus asks the disciples to tell him what they have heard: "*Who do people say that the son of man is?*" This is a easy enough question to answer: "*Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*" But now Jesus asks them a much more difficult question: "*But who do you say I am?*" This is a question put directly to those who are nearest and dearest to him, who have seen him heal and heard him preach, and have even been given their own private explanations of his sometimes perplexing stories. "*Who do you say I am?*"

In *The Seeds of Heaven*, noted preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *It's too bad that the Bible hasn't down come to us like a musical score with all the pauses written in, or like the script of a play that tells us what's happening while nothing is being said. It would be helpful to have stage directions, something like, [Center stage: As soon as Jesus asks the question the disciples all look away, some of them studying the backs of their hands while others move little piles of dirt around with the toes of their sandals.]*

It is Peter who breaks the uncomfortable silence— Peter, Taylor writes, who is *always the first one out of the gate, the first to leave his fish net and follow Jesus, the first one out of the boat to walk on the water, the first to volunteer his opinion on any given subject.* In a stunning flash of recognition, Simon Peter answers, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!*" Jesus tells him, "*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.*"

Good for Peter! He got it right. But not through any particular virtue of his own. His answer is a "blessing," a revelation from God. Jesus continues: "*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*" Now this is not a particularly good translation of what Jesus is saying. Or perhaps, more accurately, what Jesus is saying gets lost in translation. Jesus is actually making a joke, a wordplay, on Simon's Aramaic nickname— *Kephas*— which means "a stone." In the original Greek of this story, Jesus tells Peter that he is *petros*, (masculine) and on this *petra* (feminine) he will build his church. According to Barbara Brown Taylor, *Petros— the name Jesus gives Peter— means a stone or a pebble, a small piece of a larger rock, while petra means a boulder, a mother lode, a great big rock.* So what Jesus was trying to say might be better rendered as: "You are a pebble, and on the boulder of your faith I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

This is such an important thing to remember as we go about the business of trying to be the church. The pastor who leads the church is not the mother lode, not the great big rock on which the church is built. He or she is a pebble, a small piece of a much larger rock. I remember a visit to see my son's family, at that time still in in Colorado, when my first grandson was sixteen months old. Odin loved to pick up rocks on our daily walks along the dirt road near his home. He categorized the ones he could pick up easily as "tiny rocks." The rest were "*heavy rocks.*"

The church gets into trouble when we mistake a pebble— a tiny rock— for the great big rock— the heavy rock. Simon Peter was a pebble, Anthony was a pebble, I am a pebble, your pastoral candidate is a pebble. Returning to our gospel story, it seems that the most important quality of the building material Jesus chose was Peter’s faith— his trust in God, and in Jesus as the Son of the living God. In other words, the big rock, the mother lode upon which we build the church, is our trust in God, our recognition that Jesus is a revelation of God, and our desire to follow the Way Jesus taught and lived.

I know that a lot of you struggle with this “faith” thing— what you do, or don’t, believe about God, and about who Jesus is, or was, and whether you need to “believe” in Christ in order to follow the Way of Jesus. So there may be some temptation to ask your new settled pastor to take charge and to provide you with answers. And yet I also know that living with the questions may be the most “faithful” thing we can do. There are risks to a church in allowing one person to define your faith, your identity, and your mission for you. In the long run, you can’t build a strong and healthy church with just one pebble. You need the whole congregation— all the pebbles— and you need some shared sense of the nature of the big rock upon which you do your building.

In our epistle reading, Paul cautions church members, and this certainly includes church leaders, not to think too highly of themselves— we are all pebbles, all tiny rocks. And yet, each of us, like the members of a body, is important and necessary to the functioning of the whole. We all have gifts *according to the grace given to us*, and it is my great hope that each of you will continue to discover and share the gifts that God has given you for the building up of this church.

I’d like to end with a small ritual. When you entered the sanctuary, each of you was given a pebble. I’d like you to hold that pebble as you listen to these words from our Epistle reading: *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . .*

What are your gifts? What grace has been given to you? And how can each of us, each pebble, each tiny rock, contribute to the building up of the church for the future? *Silence*
And what is the boulder, the heavy rock, the motherlode upon which this church of the future will be built? *Silence*

Paul urges us to present ourselves “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” which he describes as our “spiritual worship.” This is part of our transformation of from being centered in the small ego self, to being centered in God, and it involves recognizing that each of us is a pebble and not the mother lode. And yet each and every pebble matters! You matter! So I’d like you to think of the pebble you are holding as representing you and your gifts and what you are willing to present to God for the building up of this church. And, when you are ready, bring you pebble forward and lay it on the communion table as a token of your *living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*.