

Third Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2015
St. Matthew 16:13-19
Christ Builds His Church on the Rock
Rev. George Ferch

Fellow Redeemed in Christ Jesus,

Last week in one of our hymns, we thanked God for “builders bold” whose vision for the church saw more than “brick and stone.” May our vision be pure to look beyond the rising steel and see the real church; men, women and children the Holy Spirit builds on Christ, the Cornerstone.

We are constructing a building on concrete footers. We are arranging future ministry with the building blocks of planning and committees. We do not build the church. **Christ Builds His Church on the Rock.** That rock is Christ. That rock is the one Peter and we confess.

I said that both the Holy Spirit and Christ build the church, that is, believers. Both statements are true because we cannot divide God’s works. We properly attribute the work one person of the Trinity does to all the other persons as well. God the Father builds the church as he grants forgiveness to the world through Christ.

People held many different opinions concerning Jesus’ identity as he carried out his public ministry. One time, when our Savior and his disciples were in Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asked those student-followers, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

You heard the answers go from John the Baptist back from the dead, to Elijah returned from heaven, or even Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets back on earth. We hear similar wrong opinions today about Jesus. He was a good man. He was a good prophet and teacher. He was a good example. In every case, there is nothing about Jesus being true God and the only Redeemer of the world.

Jesus was more interested in what his disciples believed. Speaking for them, Peter confessed, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The disciples through Peter acknowledged their faith that Jesus is God’s anointed one. Jesus is the seed of Abraham in whom all the nations on earth are blessed. Jesus is the Son of God, therefore, true God. This is the faith we confess in our three ecumenical creeds.

The Christ whom Peter confessed builds the church. He builds it on himself. He is the Rock. Christ did not build his church on Peter, the stone or pebble. Peter is not the first in the succession of many men on which God builds his saving church. The Christ of Peter’s confession is the sure foundation for all believers. That Christ is the rock. Christ alone is the massive rock formation, on which he builds his church.

The Holy Spirit has called us by the gospel through Word and sacrament to be his own. Christ will continue to build his church on himself. We cannot convince or convert. We cannot call to faith. We cannot change aliens into the children of God. **Christ builds his church on the rock,** on himself. You and I have stewardship of the means of grace. We do not have stewardship of building the kingdom of God.

That rock is the one Peter and we confess. This is where we insert ourselves into the picture. We make the same confession of Christ the Rock as Peter. Like Peter, we build our comfort, our peace, and our hope on Jesus Christ alone. This was no small thing for Peter and the other disciples through Peter to confess the saving truth about Jesus Christ.

The people who knew Jesus from growing up in Nazareth did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. The religious leaders did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. They even once accused Jesus of being the devil. The crowds believed while they benefitted from the bread he fed them. When Jesus told them he was the Bread of life and they had to believe in him, John tells us, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

Peter and the other disciples had continued to believe. Jesus commended Peter’s confession because it was the right confession. It was the confession God had put into Peter’s heart and brought forth from his mouth. Paul’s words to the Romans in chapter 10 come to mind, don’t they? “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” [9,10]

Peter and the others did not know this by their own thinking or choosing. Other “flesh and blood” had not revealed this truth to them. Simon knew this, Jesus said, “by my Father in heaven.” The Father revealed the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit to call Jesus’ disciples to faith. Yes, prior to Jesus’ last hours, Peter and the disciples failed to confess him before men in the weakness of fear and sorrow. Yet the Spirit kept them in faith. Jesus strengthened their faith over the forty days after his resurrection and then gave them the Holy Spirit in a special way on Pentecost for their work.

The questions for us are not why are some people unable properly to identify, confess and trust that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? Why can they not see Jesus as more than just a godly human being? Why does our good stewardship of Word and sacrament not bring everyone into the saving church, and maybe our congregation?

The bigger, better questions are, “How am I able to know and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, therefore, God?” Why do I have faith in him? Why do I want to be generous in my use of the gospel with other Christians by taking it out into the world to make disciples of all nations?

The answers lie in God’s grace to us. The Father has revealed his Son to us as the Messiah. The Holy Spirit has enlightened us with his gift of bringing us out of the darkness of unbelief into the light of faith. God the Son lived and died for us, and now lives in our hearts. God has formed us into living stones to build us on Christ the Rock, himself. God has mortared us together as the church, the spiritual body of Christ.

Our confession and faith joined with Peter and the disciples is the right confession of Christ’s person and work. It is the right confession that **Christ builds his church on the Rock**. Amen.
<SDG>