

“We Are the Church Together”

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Matthew 16:13-20, Romans 12:1-8

The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

May my words be a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path.

“The church is not a building,
the church is not a steeple,
the church is not a resting place:
the church is the people.
I am the church,
you are the church,
we are the church together.
All who follow Jesus,
all around the world.
Yes, we’re the church together.”

I learned this song leading Friendship Class for AIM. It’s really a camp song for kids, a simple message. Simple, and yet complex, one that the church has not always embraced because it is so difficult to act on.

In today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus tells Peter—whose name is Greek for “rock”—that he is the rock on which he will build his church, and that not even death will prevail against it. I’m quite sure that Peter—who rarely seemed to think things through—didn’t understand what Jesus was telling him. Would we? But after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Peter led the disciples as they tried to act on the notion of “church.”

Over the centuries that church became large and powerful. And the role of Peter—the rock—translated into the pope, a man whom many believed was the only one who held the keys of the kingdom. In the nineteenth century, the church—in its Roman Catholic Church manifestation—declared that when the pope spoke from his throne, his words were infallibly from God. Even today, crowds of believers swell St. Peter’s Square in Rome to receive the blessing of the pope, a man who commands enormous wealth and power.

A long journey from Simon Peter, the simple fisherman who was drawn into the message of the charismatic Jesus. A long journey from Peter and his friends, who gathered their courage—with a lot of help from the Holy Spirit—and carried the word of God’s love into the Hebrew, and then into the Gentile, world. But human nature being what it is, I’m not surprised that the idea that the church was the people gave way to the church as a building, as a steeple, as a resting place.

My late friend Jeff Donner, who was the pastor of St. Mary’s on campus, described the traditional view of the church as a triangle: God at the top, clergy next, then religious orders, then the people making the broad base at the bottom. In that view, the people needed to go

through all those layers of power to reach God. The priest would mediate God's word: the people were not to read Scripture on their own. The priest would celebrate the Eucharist: the people would watch, praying the rosary or other devotions, and if they didn't understand Latin . . . well, it didn't matter, because they wouldn't know what the words meant even if they were translated into their native tongue.

The Reformation tried to straighten out this mess.

- The protestant denominations encouraged the people to read the word of God so they could come to their own understandings
- They began to worship in the language of the people
- And they put forth the idea that each person could connect directly with God, that no human mediator was necessary

In the Episcopal Church today, we have followed this thinking: we have turned my friend Jeff's triangle upside-down. We have given the power to the people, and though bishops, priests, and deacons are thought to be called by God to particular roles, we do not see them as the filter through which all understanding must come, but rather as support for the people in their various callings. But that human need to have someone "in charge"—someone with more knowledge or more authority—has persisted. A vocal minority have left the Episcopal Church, disenchanted with our democratic, inclusive governance. Many in the Anglican Communion want every church to sign a covenant that proclaims the inerrancy of Scripture, especially regarding the ordination of women and homosexuals. And they want the Archbishop of Canterbury to exercise power, as does the pope, and force the recalcitrant churches—notably in the U.S. and Canada—to toe the line.

How far we have come from Jesus telling Peter that he was the rock on which he would build his church. But a rock is not the whole building. Peter was the cornerstone, one rock among the first followers. We can no longer count how many rocks have gone into the structure that is the church, for it is not a literal building, but an idea about God's kingdom of love—on this earth, and in the life to come. Peter was the first embodiment of that idea, but he was never meant to be the ultimate authority. Nor, I think, was anyone else. In the letter to the Romans appointed for worship two Sundays ago, Paul reminds his readers, in the words of Deuteronomy, that the word of God is in them—in their hearts and in their minds—so that they can act on it. They are to be rocks, to speak and act in such a way that they strengthen the structure of the continually growing church. In today's reading from Romans, Paul reminds them that they have been given various gifts of the Holy Spirit for that purpose. He names prophecy; ministry; teaching; exhorting; giving; leadership; compassion. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he names other gifts: wisdom; knowledge; healing.

I see all of these gifts in this congregation. Last week Mary Kiesgen used her gifts of wisdom and exhortation to reflect on what this parish means to her. In the weeks to come, other parishioners will use their gifts to do the same. Numerous women in this congregation knit or crochet prayer shawls, using their gifts to provide healing for those who suffer. Those who take communion to the homebound do a similar work of healing. Those who contribute to the

Goodrow Fund—in money and in time—use their gifts of compassion and generosity to improve the lives of those who can find help nowhere else. The list is long.

Peter was the cornerstone, but we are the rocks that continue to build the church. We are ordinary people—frail and flawed—just like Peter. But, like Peter, we have been given gifts. We have been given the keys of the kingdom. And we have been given a responsibility: to take those gifts, and those keys, and do something with them to bring light into our darkened world. That's always the rub: as Christians, we are to do something to bring about the kingdom. We must own our gifts. And to do that, we must believe ourselves beloved sons and daughters of our Creator, called from before time to love and serve that Creator, to love and serve our fellow travelers on this planet.