

Praise the Mount

Sermon 214 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 3, 2024

Matthew 16:13-20

Everybody knows that rocks are non-living things. We learn this early in childhood as teachers pass out worksheets with lines drawn straight down the middle. The words, “Living” and “Non-Living” typed in bold across the top, and a group of images shown for us to classify into one category or the other. This is one of the first dualisms or rules of the natural order that we are taught in our most formative years as our juvenile brains soak up information that helps us sort the world: living and non-living, good and bad, forward and backward, right and wrong, up and down, in and out... we could go on but you get the point. Everybody knows that rocks are non-living things.

And everybody knows that long before Dwayne “the Rock” Johnson, Simon Peter was the *original Rock*... The “rock” upon whom Jesus said he would build the church.

Some of us may even recognize the little play on words there as the Greek and Aramaic roots for “rock” are the same as for the name, Peter. Some of us even studied a little bit of Christian history and know that this text is the foundation of the papacy, that the popes have a direct connection to Peter and thus to Jesus’ blessing of Peter’s leadership.

That history is *powerful* and it informs the way we read into Peter’s story. But protestants have long contended that this bestowal of blessing was more widely given. That all of the disciples held the keys to the kingdom and the responsibility for the church and what would come of it, belonged to all of them; and thus to all of us.

What everybody doesn’t know - or at least what most of us tend to forget - is that this isn’t the only time Jesus calls Peter a rock . He isn’t only a rock when the implications of such are positive and affirming. In fact, this episode, *the one where Jesus gives Simon a new name (Peter) and seals his place in history as the founding stone upon which the church is built*, this very episode falls between two other “rocky” tales involving Peter and Jesus. Yes, before Peter’s famous profession of faith, his doubt (either in himself or in Jesus) causes him to sink *like a millstone* in the water. And just a few verses *after* Jesus praises Peter, giving him the keys to the kingdom, he calls Peter a stumbling block. “*Get behind me Satan! For you are a stumbling block to me!*” (Matthew 16:23)

I mean, at least Jesus is consistent with his metaphors. But we (on the other hand) seem to have a bit of a SELECTIVE MEMORY where Peter is concerned.

I think this “rock” thing is important. It is important for all of us who say that we are Jesus followers and it is especially important for those of us who are Jesus followers at Greystone Baptist Church. We have really embraced this “rock” idea here at Greystone. After all it is in our name. GreySTONE. And to underscore the point - or put to bed the argument that the church was just named Greystone because it was part of the neighborhood and that was it... let’s look at our mission statement, which is based on a scripture from 1 Peter. (*Ahhh Peter, interesting*):

*With Christ as the cornerstone,
we will build a church of living stones,
where every member is a minister and is equipped
to express God’s love by word and deed to all people.*

Ok this has to be intentional.

Realizing there’s just something about this *rock* thing, I phoned a friend who just happens to know a little something about rocks. If you don’t remember Marcia, she and her husband Lou were faithful members for a long time before they retired and moved down east. (It’s ok, we’re not bitter). Marcia taught science at Ravenscroft for years and years, and she still loves any opportunity to share her love for this beautiful planet with anyone who offers the invitation. So if you want to learn more about rocks - give her a call!

Marcia, I said, I need to talk to you about rocks. *Ooooooh, how deep do you wanna go?* I don’t know, just start talking.

Well, rocks are formed from magma that comes from the center of the earth, deep below the surface. The Appalachian mountains, for example, were formed long ago when pieces of the earth’s crust were moved by magma deep underneath the surface. As they moved, these giant pieces of crust ran into one another and when they collided, they created heat and pressure. Think about it like when you slip on a rug and the rug folds up and down. That is what happened to the earth, and the mountains were formed.

And though we think about rock (especially the biggest, heaviest, strongest rocks) as stable and stagnant, the truth is they are still moving. Sometimes they are pressed together and sometimes they are pulled apart. It all happens really slowly but we can measure it now, maybe a millimeter or at most a centimeter over the course of a year or ten years. It all happens very, very slowly.

(Hmm, that has some similarities with church, right? Things we thought immovable, are actually still in motion? Participating in a transformation that happens very, very slowly?)

There are igneous rocks and metamorphic rocks. Igneous rock is formed quickly, like if it comes straight out of a volcano and cools quickly, before having time to form. Like pumice, it is soft, abrasive, and it crumbles easily. But metamorphic rock, like granite, is made of the same minerals. The difference is it takes lots and lots of time and benefits from the heat and the pressure of the earth as it shifts and collides over time. Metamorphic rocks are strong, they last forever, and they are very hard to crack.

Hmm, now that'll preach! I told Marcia. She laughed and agreed. *Peter didn't form overnight. - she said. Peter didn't form overnight... and neither do we.*

In his book, *Faith After Doubt*, Brian McLaren writes about his extensive research in developmental psychology. We know him from the spiritual books he's written, but before he became one of the most preeminent scholars of the church and religious life, he was an English professor. As part of that vocation, he needed to understand the workings of the adolescent and young adult mind. So he started reading about how our identities are shaped and formed over time. He didn't know then where life would take him, but it is from *that* work he defines and describes four stages of faith development. These are all in the book, *Faith after Doubt*, that is a part of our Lenten curriculum.

Stage one is all about simplicity. Children learn from authority figures some simple boundaries and frameworks. Things like: right and wrong, good and bad, this and that, in and out. We need this kind of dualistic thinking because it is all we can handle and our immediate survival depends on it. As we grow *within* this stage we learn that these dualisms are more complex than we once thought. A child learns: my adults say one thing, your adults say another. Adults who sound like my adults become *us* and those who contradict become *them*. Sometimes (a lot of the time) people want to stay in stage one with faith and religion.

Stage two is about complexity. We grow and learn, test the boundaries of stage-one-truths; and we discover how to think for ourselves. In stage two our worries shift from right and wrong to things like acceptance and success; we think about how we will navigate relationships, careers, finances... and then we have to figure out how all of this will impact our faith. This is where a lot of people get off the train (so to speak). They leave faith behind because they conclude that "they've reached the end of the road in what religion has to offer" (62) when the black-and-white, right-and-wrong frameworks begin to crack and crumble.

Others react differently to the challenges of stage two. Alienated by the strict dualisms of stage one faith and stage two pragmatism, these kinds of spiritual seekers feel the questions burning deep within.

The person in stage three learns that: *What physicists say about quantum mechanics is true for all of life: reality is not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we CAN imagine. Looks deceive. Appearances lie. Full truths are far less convenient than half-truths and lies. Confident people are often con artists, and their simple rules and promises are often little more than tricks for controlling the gullible and making a profit at their expense.* (McLaren, 63)

The pursuit of truth and something firm - immovable - to replace our crumbling foundations (from stage one) drives the stage three faith, but our questions reveal a more complicated reality than that. You see, stage three faith isn't all exhilaration and exploration, before long the productive doubt that invited us to explore *all* the questions eventually led us to deconstruct everything we had constructed back in stage one. Sometimes that can leave us hopeless. But even in the midst of hopelessness, there are gifts of the spirit, gifts like humility and vulnerability. McLaren named stage 3, perplexity.

Stage four is perhaps the hardest to name and describe. It has components of humility learned in stage three; it has elements of maturity gained as one moves through the previous stages of life; it also has a touch of commitment to God even when institutions, authority figures, and previously held convictions fail. But in the end stage four was named Harmony, "because it resonated with (what McLaren calls) a new dimension of non-discriminatory love that is only possible at this stage" (McLaren, 93).

...A new dimension of non-discriminatory love...

That's what Jesus' love feels like to me when I read the Gospels: *a new dimension of non-discriminatory love... love that is only possible* with a fully developed faith.

Now, I don't know if I'll ever arrive with a stage four faith, this side of Heaven. But that is ok because as Marcia said: Peter didn't form overnight. Peter was a different kind of rock. He wasn't a stagnant, dormant, unchanging, non-living thing... Peter was a living stone, one that was continuing to grow and learn and change. And we too are *living stones*.

As long as we are alive, we are changing and being changed by the shifts taking place beneath our feet...by the forces of nature around us... and by the Holy Spirit within us and among us. Sometimes those changes can feel like they're going to spit us out prematurely

before we're ready to be formed into something solid. Other times it feels like heat and pressure PRESSING in from every possible angle.

But if there is any good news to be found in all of this (and let's remember, the Gospel is *good news*), Jesus built the church upon the rock. Whether that rock was Peter only or Peter and the disciples; whether that was igneous or metamorphic rock; whether those rocks were stage one, stage two, stage three, stage four, or some chaotic combination of them all - they were still LIVING stones, still recipients of God's non-discriminatory love, still valuable enough to be a part of the foundation of God's work in this world.

And friends, hear this good news... *we are too.*