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“The Rock Is This Guy”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 12, 2021
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 50: 4-9a Mark 8: 27-35

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens— awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. 7 The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Mark 8: 27-35

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” 34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

What matters the most is what matters the most

As you know, Messiah means Savior,
and the first disciples identified Jesus of Nazareth
as the Messiah, as the Savior of the world.
We get our name by being disciples, followers, students
of our Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.
What's in a name, a title, anyway?
Why does Jesus' identity matter?
And what about our own identity as disciples of Christ?

Everything starts with love.
God loves you.
Love one another.
We get our name from the One who loves us, who saves us, who offers salvation,
the One who redeems us, renews us, again and again and again,
because He loves us.
Jesus Christ is the One who gives us our name,
our Sense of Self, our identity,
our passion, our promise, our beginning, and our end.
And He is right here, within you and in all the world.

I interpret a Melissa Etheridge song lyric to be about our Creator's identity:
"Yes, I Am -- your passion, your promise, your end. Yes, I Am."

What matters the most is what matters the most

For responses that help guide our daily walk through life,
we look to the Word in which we overhear a conversation
between Jesus Christ and the first disciples.
This conversation is recorded
in the gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke.
[Matthew 16:13–16; Mark 8:27–29; Luke 9:18–20]
We heard Mark's version;
listen to Matthew's retelling of the story.

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples,
"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah,
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."
He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

*And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.
And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church..."*

What matters the most is what matters the most

*"Ever have one of those 'Ah ha moments'
where your mind just clicks to make something clear
that was puzzling before? [\[1\]](#)
This happened to Simon in the district of Caesarea Philippi
during a discussion about the identity of Jesus.
After listening to the various ideas of who Jesus might be –
which included the reincarnation of various prophets –
Simon pops off with "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."
I can imagine there was a stunned silence for a moment or two
before Jesus affirms Peter's pronouncement.
To be sure that rest of the room understands what just happened,
Jesus declares that Simon's 'Ah ha moment' had a divine influence...
...Once Jesus affirms Simon's divine revelation,
he blesses him with a new name, Peter (meaning Rock...),
and declares Christ will build the church on 'this rock.'*

*It is only fitting that while researching this text, I had an 'Ah ha moment' too.
I noticed that 'this rock' that Jesus is referring to is not Peter—
it is the confession "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
In other words, Jesus is the rock of the church...
No wonder Paul refers to Him as the 'foundation,' (I Corinthians 3:11)
...That is some 'Ah ha moment' for Peter..."*

And for me, as well.

What matters the most is what matters the most

*Ah ha moments abound.
Jesus winks, nods, points his thumb at His chest:
This Rock is this guy.
Stand on my shoulders,
and I will lift you up.
Trust in me,
And I will bear your burdens.
Follow me to the Cross,
and though the way be hard and the path be winding,
I will lift you up today and forevermore.*

I love that Jesus makes His point with a wink and a smile and wordplay.
I love that Jesus defines our identity through Him.
He is “this rock” upon which the church is built.
Christ is “the rock” from which we get our good name.
The Messiah is the One, “this rock” upon which our identity is grounded.
Our foundation is unshakable; it is solid.

This Rock is as sure as the Love of God.

What matters the most is what matters the most

Join with Peter, which in Greek is Petras, the rock.
Confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God,
and proclaim Him Lord and Savior of the world,
requiring nothing more—and nothing less—as a basis of our life together.

I love the clarity and depth of this tenet of the Faith.
I love this rock on which we stand,
that you and I can belong to this Disciples movement of God’s people
whether or not we believe in apostolic or any creedal statements.

What matters the most is what matters the most:
confess, profess, accept, welcome in the love of a loving, living God.

That is a rock we can stand on, trust in, gather ‘round, testify and proclaim,
a foundation upon which we can build our life and meaning,
an identity we can embody, a love and compassion we can share.

Standing foursquare on this rock,
we tap into our confidence in the Rock, this Guy, the Guy.
With this confidence
we gain the courage to reach out and relate to neighbors from all walks of life,
confident in our conviction, fearless in our faith, hungry to connect.

What matters the most is what matters the most

Speaking as a Christian who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,
as the Rock of my life and the Rock upon which the Church is built
– and building –
I am supremely confident and comfortable
relating to and working alongside neighbors
whose faith expressions and understanding
may be vastly different than mine own,
yet as holy to them as mine is to me.

No judgment, no conditions, no prejudice.
Only love and respect and a prayer for universal peace.

What matters the most is what matters the most

Yesterday our congregation joined with Muslims, Jews, Sikhs,
Baha'i, Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and more
to commemorate 9/11.

Yesterday was the 20th Anniversary of the attack that killed close to 3,000 souls.
Yesterday morning we gathered at Ebster Pavilion,
whether in person or via Facebook,
to remember, to reconcile, and to relate.

Our theme was "Turning Toward Each Other"
We prayed together, sang together,
some of us wept, all of us built a symbolic bridge of hope.

Afterward a student from Agnes Scott College said,
*"The stories you shared, when the people broke sticks, moved me.
I was so touched I cried. Where did you get that?"*

Meaning, who wrote it, how did you find the words?

"We did," I said.

*"Those words that we shared were spoken in our planning sessions
as we listened to each other's pains and dreams.
I wrote everything down,
and later we incorporated them into the storytelling."*

Knowing that detail -- that the story includes authentic dialogue and a-ha moments --
listen as Audrey Galex, Amin Tomeh, Azka Mahmood,
Gogi Basi, John Bender and I step forward to the microphones
each of us holding a thin stick.

Audrey got us going:

Audrey

Hear a story.
A father had many children.
As he lay dying, he called them together.
He gave each one a stick and told them to break it.

James

My friend Sharon was killed on 9/11 and I still grieve.
Breaks Stick.

Amin

My religion is Islam.

I feel like it got hijacked after 9-11, and I am angry, and sometimes afraid.

Breaks Stick.

John

My country was attacked by terrorists, and I am angry and seek revenge.

Breaks Stick.

Gogi

My hope after 9-11 was for forgiveness and unity,
and I am disappointed we chose war and enmity.

Breaks Stick.

Azka

My soul was traumatized, and I feel broken.

Breaks Stick.

Audrey

Then their father gave them a bundle of sticks, saying,
*"Break these! See, you cannot, because you are stronger together.
Your unity does not require uniformity."*

Amin

Your friend Sharon was killed on 9-11 and I grieve with you.

He cannot break the bundle

James

Amin, I am not Muslim, yet I affirm Islam is a religion of peace
and hereby promise to be your ally.

He cannot break the bundle

Azka

Yes, our nation was attacked, and I feel your hurt.

Let us seek the ways of forgiveness.

She cannot break the bundle

John

We must never give up hope. Be strong and of good courage,
for we have a God of Many Names who loves and empowers us.
He cannot break the bundle

Gogi

We may live in a fragmented world
yet join me in choosing to be a source of wholeness and healing.
He cannot break the bundle

Audrey

Hear a story.
Two long-time neighbors ruptured their friendship.
One of the neighbors found a carpenter
and told him to build a fence between their properties.
He gave him sticks for the fence, then left to go into town,
expecting when he returned to see a long wall.
When he returned, instead of seeing a wall,
he found the carpenter had built instead a bridge connecting their properties.
and there was his neighbor walking across the bridge,
arms wide open, saying,
"Whatever it was that created the rift between us, I am sorry."
"I am sorry, too," said the neighbor.
The two neighbors embraced: their argument already forgotten.
They turned to the carpenter and invited him to stay.
The carpenter said, "Thank you, but I need to get going.
I've got more bridges to build."

Amin

Be a builder of bridges.
Be a builder of relationships.
Everyone's needed when it comes to building bridges.

John

Everyone has a role to play.
No role is too small or insignificant.
We need someone to have a vision of a bridge, to see the possibilities, to bring it into focus for
all of us.

Gogi

We need someone to collect and carry the wood.
Someone to cut the wood.
Someone to put it together.
Someone to help finance it.

Azka

We need someone to lead the way across the bridge.
Someone to model forgiveness.
Someone to dare to be first to open their arms to the hurt and hurting, to give hope to the hopeless.

James

We need someone to share the story. Will you share the story?
"A Change is Gonna Come."
Be the change you want to see in the world!

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.