

16th Sunday after Pentecost, 2008 (Proper 17A)

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

Old Testament: Isaiah 51:1-6

Epistle: Romans 11:33-12:8

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We knew there was a problem when the cracks began to appear in the walls of my parents' house. They started out small, barely noticeable. But then they grew wider and longer, weaving their way across walls and ceilings, spreading out from the corners of door jambs and window sills. Eventually the doors didn't close right, windows were hard to open, and we knew there was something seriously wrong.

First, we tried patching the cracks and repainting the walls. But this was a quick fix and did not solve the problem for long. The cracks soon reappeared and in greater numbers. Next we tried to get to the root of the problem- the larger cracks down in the basement walls. We patched those with concrete, but the concrete didn't hold. We tried everything we could think of, but every time we thought the problem was fixed, the cracks came back.

By now I'm sure you know the source of the problem- the foundation. More accurately, it was the ground underneath the foundation. A drought had caused the ground to shift, and the foundation was no longer stable. Eventually, professionals were called, the foundation was repaired, but there are still problems to this day, because the ground is not solid.

Which brings us to the gospel lesson. "Who do people say that I am?" asks Jesus. All the answers are less than solid: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet. Jesus preached like a prophet, Jesus performed miracles like a prophet, he must be a prophet. But this is not solid ground. Don't build here, or your walls will be full of cracks. Even true prophets are only messengers, spokesmen, mouthpieces for God. They are not anything in and of themselves. When you build on this foundation, what you have is a cult, puts all its weight on the messenger rather than the message and the one who sent him. Cracks quickly appear, and often the whole house will collapse, as we saw at Jonestown and Waco.

The only solid foundation is, of course, Jesus. But which Jesus? Not the prophet-Jesus, the Jesus who is one option among many. The correct answer is "e. none of the above." Only the Messiah, the Son of God Jesus will hold. Only this confession is rock-solid. This is not anything we would come up with by ourselves. "Blessed are you, Simon son of John, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but our Father who is in heaven." This is what makes Peter's confession rock solid and sure- it comes to him as gift.

Anything that is based on ourselves and our ability will ultimately fall apart- our knowledge, our spirituality, our morality, our strength, none of these will hold. Just look at Peter. Next week we will hear Jesus call Peter Satan. He will eventually deny and abandon the one whom he now calls the Son of God. Huge cracks running across the walls. If it's all about us

and how smart we are, or how nice we are, or what good people we are, it won't be long before cracks start to appear.

Cracks in the church start out small: minor differences of opinion and annoyances. They grow into disagreements over what songs to sing, how to spend the money... Then the cracks grow as people start to split off into parties and factions. Some give up and stop coming. Others vow to stay and fight. Visitors can see obvious problems and steer clear of the whole mess.

The cracks may look different from church to church, but the root problem is always the same. The foundation is not on solid ground. If we ever make ourselves and our opinions into the foundation, if I put myself and my personal preferences first, if it's all about me and what I like and what I want and what makes me comfortable, then it's only a matter of time before cracks start to appear. We can patch and paint all we want, but it won't solve the problem.

The only sure, rock-solid foundation is Jesus Christ. And this is where Jesus builds His church. It's not up to us to build the church. Jesus says, "On this rock, I will build my church." The church is Jesus' doing. He is the carpenter, the master craftsman, and He builds the church on the solid, immovable rock of Peter's confession. The confession is rock solid because it comes from the Father. The church is rock solid because it is built by Jesus on this foundation. Everything that happens in the church that is done by Jesus is therefore rock solid- uncrackable. Everything that happens here confesses Christ. He does the lot. He builds the house of His church. And it's quite a house.

As you walk up to our Lord's house, the first thing that catches your eye is the door. The front door to our Lord's house is made of solid wood, like the cross which once bore His body. You have the sign of the holy cross, the name of Jesus, on your forehead, and so you are invited in through the door of the invocation.

Once inside, you see a basin of cool, fresh water. Our Lord is here to greet you. To your surprise, He stoops to wash your feet with the words of holy absolution. He washes away all the dirt and grime of last week, and leaves you fresh and clean.

As you begin to look around the house you are struck by the incredible works of art that adorn the walls. Some have been painted by professionals, others drawn by children. There's a shepherd leading His sheep beside the still waters, and there's a mighty fortress, you see the little town of Bethlehem and Jerusalem the Golden, in one you see Christian soldiers marching as to war, and in another the Rock of Ages. You are captivated by the beauty of this artwork, these psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

The Lord invites you further in to sit and have a chat. He's got a comfy couch, a lazy boy recliner and a few beanbag chairs for the kids. You sit and are captivated by the sound of His voice. He begins to tell you stories of long, long ago, all your favorite family stories. There's the one about grandpa Moses and his adventures in Egypt, there's old aunt Esther who lived in Persia and even got to be queen, and your crazy cousin Daniel who had those strange dreams and spent the night with the lions. There are also cards and letters on the coffee table from other family members- Paul's written most, but there are several from John, a couple from Peter and

one from James. The letters bring greetings, encouragement and more news from the rest of the family. Our Lord even tells you stories about yourself and what you were like as a kid, how you kept getting into trouble, but he never gave up on you.

Then the Lord leans back, looks you in the eye and asks you how you've been. He wants to know what's been going with you and your family, what you're looking forward to in the coming week, what you're worried about, what's on your mind, and you bring these thoughts to Him in prayer.

Then the Lord leads you into the dining room. It's time to eat. You could smell the food from the moment you walked in the door, and you are starving. There's a long table with seats all the way around, a white tablecloth, candles, and polished silver. Today the placemats are green. The Lord invites you to join in giving thanks for the food (something that is good, right, and salutary to do). Then comes the meal. The Lord serves each guest personally, and everyone is satisfied. "No thanks, I couldn't possibly have another bite." When the meal is over, you thank your host for His generosity. "It's been my pleasure," He says, and gives you a big hug, His face shining upon you.

As you look once more around the house, you are struck by how everything looks just right. There are no cracks in the walls, no dust or cobwebs in the corners, no fingerprints on the glass. The woodwork is all ornately carved, all done by hand. Everything fits together perfectly- the lamps, the curtains, the carpeting. The house is solid, it's sturdy, but more than that, it is beautiful.

Outside is the busy world, full of stress and pressure. Outside there is danger. Outside the storms rage. The outside world is ugly and dirty and chaotic. Everything is falling apart. Inside, there is peace and safety. Inside there is calm, there is order. Inside there is beauty. Inside there is beauty, inside there is life. Everything is this way, because this is the way that the Lord made things.

Everything here confesses that Christ- Sunday worship, the food bank, Bible Class, VBS, all of this says of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And this is how the Lord builds His church. Everything in your life that confesses Christ- your generous giving, your devotional life, your family life, the way you treat others, all of this says of Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." This is also how the Lord builds His church. If it confesses Christ, then it comes to us as a gift from our heavenly Father. If it comes from our heavenly Father, it is sure, it is solid- no cracks.