

Peter: Rocky

From the sermon series: No Stained Glass Saints

Text: Matthew 16: 18, 23

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. Matthew 16:18

... He... said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men." Matthew 16:23

Peter is either an Apostle made for this series, or this series is made for Peter, I'm not sure which. But, if the series hadn't come along, it would have had to be invented in order to do justice to Peter, in order to get Peter before us as a saint who was not exactly made of stained glass. Peter, the Disciple about whom the most is spoken in the Gospels, the one who is not only most spoken of, but the one who speaks the most, the one who speaks over and over again, sometimes magnificently and sometimes miserably – Peter who had many faults and failings, but one of which was not that he was "Mr. Cool." Peter was the person who was pretty open. He had a difficult time disguising what was going on in the inside of his mind and heart. Peter was a man who spoke before he thought, but never maliciously, always sincerely, always in exuberance, with enthusiasm. He had many faults, but one of them was not that he lacked passion. He was in many ways blundering, but he was in all ways lovable. And his sins, which were many, were covered, because he loved much. And in the end, the faith that Jesus placed in him was more than vindicated by this unstable man who became solid as a rock: Peter, the Apostle.

I was amused this week thinking about Peter. The Christian Church has done a marvelous job about being contentious about things that don't really matter, and I was reflecting on the old Protestant and Catholic debate about the role of Peter. I have stood in St. Peter's in Rome and I have seen etched in marble in large letters the name of Peter. And then the succeeding names, all of those who have occupied the chair of Peter in Rome. I know, as good Roman Catholic historians know today, that there are some gaps in those early centuries. I also know, as the

best of the Roman historians and theologians know, that to project back from the twentieth century or the sixteenth century or the thirteenth century the conception of the papacy, to project it back into the first century and to invest Peter with it is a fruitless and futile exercise which has little value. And yet, I've shared with you before that I was impressed and I was moved standing before that list and seeing the name of Peter and knowing that, even if every name in those early generations could not be verified as having held the recognized primacy in the Roman Church, nonetheless, the very fact that I was standing there in the twentieth century in the greatest basilica in the world was an indication of the continuity of the Christian tradition that had indeed come down to us from Jesus Christ, who said to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

I was amused and laughed to myself about how ridiculous we have been over the centuries in the Church with all of the battles we have fought. As a matter of fact, it probably would have been to the Protestants' advantage to admit that Peter was the first Pope because it would have been the best argument in the world against infallibility, which was not an early Church doctrine, but one that came on only subsequently in later centuries as a means of buttressing the authority of the Church.

Peter was the first Pope. At least Peter had the preeminence in the apostolic band. There's no doubt about that. In every listing of the Disciples, in the Gospels, they are in different order, with two exceptions. Peter is always named first; Judas is always named last. Peter did have a kind of investiture by Jesus. I suppose that it was somewhat because of his natural endowments. He was a leader but, beyond that, it was because Jesus had tapped him and called him and claimed him and commissioned him to be at the head of that apostolic band. He had a kind of preeminence among his peers and his equals in the early band of disciples. So, Jesus chose a rock in order to make him into a rock.

Peter. Rocky. His way was rocky. He often rocked the boat, and he stumbled a good many times along the way. His way was rocky, but he became solid as a rock, I suppose, through the insight of Jesus who named him Rock before he was solid, who named him in order to enable him to live into his name.

The Quaker Elton Trueblood is responsible for this understanding of Rock, or Peter, as a nickname. I've shared it with you before, but it's too good not to keep sharing over the years, and maybe some of you haven't heard it. So, let me tell you what really happened when Jesus called Peter, Peter. You have to understand, first of all, that there's no record anywhere of anyone being called Peter before the time of Jesus. It was not a name. The Rock. Jesus called him Rock. Now, his name was Simon, and when Jesus really meant business with him, he addressed him as Simon Bar Jonah. "Bar" meant "son of." Jonah would be our word for John. Peter's father's name was John, and John named Peter Simon.

So, Jesus was really giving to Simon a new name. Not seriously in the sense of rechristening him, but he was giving him a nickname, a nickname which often picks out a characteristic of a person, and when a nickname is really expressive of something that is so intrinsic to that person that you can't think of that person ever again without the name, then you've done a good job of naming.

Jesus called Simon, who was the son of John, Rock or, as we would say, Rocky. Now, he was the son of John, but the son of John has come down to us as a last name - Johnson. Johnson is not really a last name, a label of some sort that derives from any other place than from the fact that the person so named was a son of John and with the inversion it became Johnson, and so what Jesus was saying to Simon was, " From now on you'll be Rocky Johnson." And that's true. Rocky Johnson. Simon Bar Jonah, Simon Son of John, Rocky Johnson. The Church is built on Rocky Johnson! And I agree with the Church in Rome. I think he was the first Pope. The first pope was Rocky Johnson! What a great joke! What a sense of humor has the Almighty! What a needle to discourage all of the pomp and seriousness and self-importance of the Church over the centuries when you think of the fact that Jesus gave preeminence to a person upon whom he said he would found the Church, a person no less than Rocky Johnson!

Now, when you think of all of the self-importance of all of the church leaders, popes and priests and bishops and preachers and even an elder and a deacon or two, when you think of all of our presumption, all of our pompousness, our pomposity and all of the ceremony – how we take ourselves seriously in this world as though finally God and Truth and existence itself depended upon the likes of us serious-minded individuals. Whenever you get to thinking that – whenever you get to thinking that it all rests on you, whenever you get to thinking that you carry the whole world on your shoulders, then remember that Jesus said, "I'll put the whole business on the shoulders of Rocky Johnson!" And think of Peter and then realize that the first thing that you've got to do is laugh at yourself. And the second thing is to get on with the job with good courage. Because, if God could do something with Peter, my, what he could do with you!

Simon Peter. We call him Simon Peter now, but Simon, son of John, Rocky Johnson, was the one who was spokesman for the apostolic band and who gave that great confession to the question of Jesus, "Who do you say that I am?", "You are the Christ, you are the Messiah." The Messiah. We really should translate that Messiah, not use the Greek word Christ, because what Peter was saying is, "You are the one toward whom the whole Old Testament points. You are the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. You are the great David's greater Son. You are the Anointed One, the one anointed with the spirit, the breath, the life, the power of God. You are the Son of the living God." And Jesus blessed Peter for that, and acknowledged that it wasn't something that Peter came to because he had some great intellect or some great ingenuity, some great intuitive sense, but it was because Almighty God had made it known to him. And then he went on to say, "You are Rocky, and on you I will build my Church."

And we went on and read another paragraph and we found that, as Jesus began to prepare his disciples for the inevitability of that which lay before him, speaking about his entry into Jerusalem and his death, Peter said, "Not so, Lord." Peter, once again, as exuberant in his protest this time as he was enthusiastic about his confession just a little bit before, said, "It won't happen to you. Lord. It just couldn't possibly happen to you. Not while I'm here!" The enthusiasm, the lack of cool, the confidence and overconfidence in his own power and stability – all of that coming out of Peter, protesting against that which Jesus was saying, refusing really to hear that difficult word. He says, "It won't happen as long as I'm around, to which Jesus had to say the most severe word he said to anyone – "Get behind me, Satan. You're not on God's side, you're on man's side."

And so it was that the first Pope not only was given a great declaration of blessing by Jesus, but also was given hell by Jesus. That's the kind of saints that make up the Church of Jesus Christ. Up one minute and down the next. Filled with inspiration and speaking out of revelation one minute, and the next minute so filled with their own self-preoccupation and their own designs and destiny that they can't hear the Lord speak, and therefore go contrary to Him and can actually be spoken of as being on the side of the Evil One.

Peter, in all of his boasting, was doing it really out of the beautiful quality of his love. There were other disciples who didn't say anything to what Jesus was saying. And that's not to their credit. Peter at least responded, but he responded out of his own limited insight, his own twisted vision of things, this first Pope of the Christian Church. Jesus had to say to him on another occasion when Peter said, "If it takes going all the way to death, it won't happen to you," Jesus warned him that before the cock would crow twice, he would deny the Lord three times. And you know the story: Peter following Jesus after his arrest, after an aborted attempt to protect Jesus by the drawing of his sword, warming himself by the fire in the courtyard of the High Priest, denying to chambermaids that he had any knowledge at all of Jesus. One wonders how all of those things can coexist in the heart of one man. How one can be so firm and clear in one's declaration of faith one moment and so miserable in one's denial to the extent that he cursed, saying, "I don't know the man"?

Was he like Falstaff, only running to protect himself to return and fight another day? I think that's probably being too kind to Peter. I think that Peter was that kind of person that is made up of light and shadow, of light and darkness. He had a light side and a shadow side. He was a mixed bag; he was filled with equivocation and ambiguity; he had a great love; he had a great devotion; he had a great loyalty. He was fearful, he was afraid, he was chicken! He was as inconsistent and unstable and unreliable and unpredictable as I am! And all four of the Gospels record that miserable denial. One of them, only Luke, tells us that when Peter denied the third time and the cocks marked the rising of the sun, Jesus looked at Peter. They all tell us that Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Have you ever had to look into the eyes of Jesus and turn and weep bitterly? It's not a fun experience, because in that moment one knows that one has not only denied one's Lord, one has denied the truth, one has denied oneself, one has defeated the best that is in one, and one's hopes and ideals and dreams and aspirations come crashing down in a moment, and all one can do at such a moment is to weep bitterly.

It is interesting that in Mark's account of the Resurrection, Jesus encounters the women and says, "Go and tell my brethren, and Peter." Isn't that just like Jesus? Go and tell my brethren, and Peter. Be sure you tell Peter. Tell the rest, but just in case you might think that Peter is now an exception, set aside to be isolated, to be judged and condemned, let me tell you, you be sure and tell Peter. And then, of course, there's the scene after Easter when the disciples are out fishing. Peter was still eating his heart out. In the 21st chapter of John where it begins, Peter says, "I'm going to go fishing." When you're really hurting, when you're really distraught and confused, the best thing to do is to do the thing you do best, to go back to the old, familiar routine. Peter said, "I'm going to go fishing." And Jesus came and made a charcoal fire on the beach and prepared breakfast. And in that encounter post-Easter, he caught Peter's eye and he said, "Do you love me?" Peter said, "Yes, I love you." And he said, "Feed my sheep." And he said a second time, "Peter, do you love me," and Peter said, "Yes, I love you." He said, "Feed my lambs." And he said to him a third time, "Peter, do you love me," and Peter was distressed because he said to him a third time and he said, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you." He said, "Feed my sheep." (I just want you to know that we're even now. Three times you denied me, three times I make you tell me what I know is true. You love me.)

Unpredictable, unstable, unreliable, irresponsible, compulsive, wonderful, enthusiastic, passionate, blundering idiot, Peter, first Pope, Rocky Johnson.

Judas denied his Lord and he went out and he hanged himself. Have you ever thought of hanging yourself? If you have ever gone out and wept bitterly, then you have had the thought in your mind and in your heart that it would be easier to end it all? A judge did that in Detroit this week. Many years of respect, reputation, no doubt quality service, then exposed and he shot himself. So did Judas. Suicide is probably the ultimate action of wounded pride. When I finally come full turn and see who I really am, that's difficult enough to take. But, when everybody else knows it too, it's almost easier just to be done with it all.

Judas hanged himself after betraying his Lord. Peter wept. He had all of the same inclinations and all of the same feeling and all of the same self-accusation and all of the same pain, but he caught Jesus' eye, and instead of killing himself, instead of giving up on himself, instead of selling short the grace of God, he came back once more. Rocky Johnson.

Alexander White, the great Scottish preacher with fruitful imagination, has us imagine Peter climbing into the pulpit to preach the funeral sermon of Judas.

What do you think might have been his text? What do you think might have been his plea, his cry to those who gathered in the wake of Judas? Might he not have said to that gathered audience, "Judas quit too soon. He gave up on God and so he gave up on himself. But don't ever give up on God, for His grace is greater than all our sins. No matter how deep you have fallen, how badly you have failed, how dark the night, how deep the pain – grace greater than all our sins can transform us and make us new again."

Rocky Johnson. Let him be a sign to us that the Church is founded on the possibility of a second chance, of a new lease on life, of beginning all over again! And then, with Rocky Johnson, maybe we, too, will come to the point where someone will say, "Speak no more in his name," and we'll be able to say with calm confidence and deep assurance, "You'll have to judge for yourself whether it is right to obey God or man. But, as for me, I cannot but speak the things that I have seen and heard. Jesus Christ whom you crucified, God raised up. And he's made me new. Blessed be His holy name." Amen and amen.