"Foundation Stone or Stumbling Block?"

Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be transformed from stumbling blocks into foundation stones. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Thank God for Peter! Where would we be without this patron saint of inconstancy and bravado? What if the early church had included a PR manager who insisted that all these stories about Peter's mistakes be removed from the gospels? As it is, church traditions often conspire to de-emphasize the contradictions that are present here. I'm glad that we got a little off kilter from the lectionary this month, such that it could occur to me to combine last week's gospel reading with this week's gospel reading. Pull those Bibles out again, if you would. If you turn to page 18, you'll see that verses 13-20 comprise a section titled "Peter's Declaration about Jesus." And then the next verse starts a new section called "Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection." In my NRSV study Bible, the commentary actually notes that verse 20 concludes a "third major section" that began in chapter 11, and then that verse 21 is the beginning of a "fourth major section." The lectionary puts these two sections on different Sundays. All that despite the fact that the one comes right after the other, and there are some clear literary bridges between the two. What if it's actually important that we read these two sections together?

Before we get too deep into the holy contradictions of Simon Peter, I do want to recognize that there may be people who don't identify as closely with him as I do. There are many folks, including some of you in this room, who don't just blurt out loud whatever comes into your head. Some people think things quietly and mull them over for a while before ever speaking those things aloud. You may have long considered Peter a bit of an irritating blowhard, for all I know. But is it possible that it's just a matter of degree? That even if you wouldn't have said the impolitic thing out loud, it might nevertheless pop up in your mind, contradicting your best judgment? I guess if you can't find anyway to relate to Peter at all, you can just listen along as a way of learning more about the spiritual struggles of others.

Because for many of us, the fact that Peter is such a mess of contradictions is a blessing. Rather than constructing a barrier between these two sections, let's notice how they're connected by the swinging pendulum that is Peter's passionate heart. First of all, there is the geological bridge. In verse 18, Jesus tells Peter that "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." This is, of course, a pun, for the name Peter in Greek – Petros – actually means rock. The rock here is a foundation stone; Peter's clear confession about Jesus' identity will undergird the church for centuries to come.

But just five verses later, Peter has become a totally different kind of rock. Jesus says to him, "You are a stumbling block to me." Ouch. How did we get from there to here so quickly?

There is another parallel bridge from the first section to the second section. Jesus tells Peter that "the gates of Hades will not prevail against" the church he's going to build on the foundation stone of Peter's confession. But five verses, he's calling Peter himself, not blessed, but "Satan"! I don't think it's a coincidence that these two conversations between Peter and Jesus both have references to rocks and both have references to the forces of evil, nor that they are stacked one right after the other. There is a lesson there for those who will take the time to notice it.

What is it that happens between verse 18 and verse 23? In the first section, Peter says out loud the conclusion we could guess most of the disciples had been wondering about as they followed Jesus through villages and towns, watching him teach and heal and feed people. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And for being the one to say it out loud, Peter has praise heaped upon him. He is "blessed," he has clearly received the teaching of God in heaven, and he will be the foundation of the church, the one with authority to determine the balance between justice and mercy, who is in and who is out.

But then—then Jesus starts getting into the details of what Messiahship entails. Namely, torture and death. And Peter is sure he must have that wrong. "God forbid

it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" Peter has gone straight from being named the foundation stone of the church to deciding he gets to be in charge, telling Jesus and even God how things should go.

Is this the protective passion of love, a lashing out of loyalty that wants to keep the beloved from harm? Is this a different understanding of what a Messiah is, one that longs for a conquering hero rather than a sacrificial lamb? Or is it just fear? If the Messiah I follow will be killed, what will happen to me? Surely this can't be how it works?

And what does Jesus tell him? I would like to say that Jesus gently reminds him that it is not his role to be out front determining the path the movement is following. But that's not how it goes. "Get behind me, Satan!" That is, you're following me, not the other way around. The way you are suggesting is not the way of God. That stuff you're worried about – namely, self-preservation – is a human concern, not a divine one.

And it is, isn't it? Self-preservation – whether for our actual selves or for those we love – is one of the primary motivators of our fears, wouldn't you say? Have you had a moment when your commitment wavered? When the cost of the gospel way felt like a price too high to pay? When all the things you thought you would stand up for suddenly seem like someone else's problems because speaking up would risk too much? The good news is, if that has happened to you, you're not alone. Peter is right

there. Did he learn his lesson? Not clear. In the very next chapter, Matthew tells the story of the transfiguration. The fact that Peter was invited up the mountain might show us that Jesus hasn't completely lost confidence in him. But once he's there, experiencing the dazzling mystery of the Divine Presence, he's back to blurting out whatever ridiculous ideas come into his head. And of course, by the time the story comes around to the Last Supper, Peter is proclaiming his allegiance once again, even to the point of death, and then weeping bitterly when the cock crows and he realizes he's failed to live up to his oath of loyalty.

Even if you don't see yourself in this impulsive, passionate loud mouth of a disciples, perhaps the existence of Peter can be a blessing for all of us. Because there are many different ways to be people of wavering faith, whether we do it out loud or not. Sometimes our sins – our fears, our willfulness and pride – are revealed not by what we say, but by what we don't say.

If we want to be part of the church that Peter became a foundation stone for, we need to recognize that it matters where we place the rock of our faith. Situated wrongly, it could become a stumbling block; placed with grace and humility, it can help sustain the foundation. If we cement our faith to the wrong things, grow rigid around rules and practices rather than standards of compassion and mercy, we will become obstacles for the growth of the church. If instead, we let Jesus guide the way we build up the body, flexing and adapting as we grow, the steadiness of our faith can

provide strength for others to find the right place for their faith. If we can move into the future trusting in God, following Jesus who brings wholeness out of brokenness and life out of death, we can become the ones who stand at the gates and welcome in the whole people of God. Hallelujah and Amen.