

Upon this Rock, Thy Kingdom come
By Rev. Katie Hambrick Suddeth

Today's scripture has led to a lot of debate through the church. Our Catholic Sisters and Brothers use this scripture as the basis for needing a pope. They believe that when Jesus said "upon this rock, I will build my church," is Jesus appointing Peter as the first pope. Most Protestant denominations believe that when Jesus says upon this rock I will build my church, that Jesus meant it was on Peter's faith that Jesus would build his church.

This scripture has been debated in the church for centuries. There is not much debate that Peter was one of the early church leaders. We know that his mission and ministry helped form the early church. We know that he had deep faith, even though sometimes his actions did not reflect that. However, maybe the rock that Jesus is going to build his church on is not focusing on the man or his personal faith, but the rock is what the man said. What Peter said in response to Jesus. Maybe it's the what, not the who.

Jesus is having a conversation with the disciples, and he asks who do you say I am? Simon Peter is of course the one to respond and says you are the Messiah, Son of the Living God. This is when Jesus responds to Peter- whose name means rock- saying upon this rock I will build my church. It stands with good

reason reading this that Jesus is giving Peter a promotion- making him the supreme disciple. However, Jesus is not referring to any strengths or accomplishments Peter has done as a disciple, Jesus is not saying oh Peter, you are the one who is perfect and you will now be the head disciple- Jesus is not saying oh Peter, you have showed perfect and flawless faith, so you will be the head of my church- but Jesus is referring to what Peter said- Peter's testimony. Peter's testimony that Jesus is the Messiah and through you I see the Kingdom of God.

The church is built on witness. Peter's witness, Paul's witness, Priscilla's witness, C.S. Lewis' witness, Martin Luther King Jr.'s witness, Rachel Held Evans' witness, your witness, and mine. The church is built on witness because the church itself is a living witness.

The beautiful and hard thing about church is it is not just merely a means to achieve a greater goal nor is it a voluntary association of like minded individuals. It is not that we agree on everything or think exactly the same way that brings us all together. For example, some of us here like starbucks coffee, some like dutch bros coffee, and some of us will never step foot in a coffee shop because why pay for that when you can just make it at home.

What brings us together and binds us together is our witness. Each of us individually has a witness of God- or maybe that witness is just a fleeting tiny thought or spark- but that witness is what drives the church.

That is why when the church comes together, we are not only individual testifiers within a community, but a community that testifies. That is what it means to be the Priesthood of all believers. We are all priests and ministers in our own way. We are the hands and feet that God has on earth to carry out his work.

Jesus is laying the groundwork- drawing the blueprints for the church and its formation based on witness because Jesus is trying to connect the church to the kingdom of God. The church is not just here to announce the coming of a future kingdom or prepare people for that day- our work is to be a living witness to the gospel. By being a witness to the gospel-

By being God's hands and feet on earth-

The church because the answer to the prayer thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven-

We, the church at our best, become the living testimony and witness of the Kingdom of God.

That is also why Jesus mentions binding and loosening. Whatever the church does, whatever action it takes- good or bad-

becomes part of the witness of Christ. It influences how people view the Kingdom of God, whether we mean for it to or not.

If you are anything like me, then hearing that the church is supposed to be a connection to the Kingdom of God- a living witness of the gospel, just makes you want to crawl under a pew and hide. That task seems daunting. It seems like too much to carry and makes me feel that every step I take has to be so clearly thought out so that I do not fail thus causing hurt to the church's witness. The good news comes from us looking at who Jesus is talking to in scripture...

Jesus is talking to Peter. Peter, the man that will deny Jesus three times, Peter the man who sank when he jumped out of the boat for lack of faith, Peter the man who speaks before he thinks...

Upon Peter's testimony, Jesus will build the church. The Kingdom of God is not built on perfection. If we were perfect or the church was, we wouldn't need the gospel.

Jesus is not saying you better be perfect or you'll hurt my witness. In fact, our failings and flaws are why we need the gospel. They make this witness stronger. In Japanese culture, there is a practice that when a vase breaks that the Japanese bind it back together with gold. Making Gold run through the

cracks and crannies of the vase. It is the art of recognizing that sometimes our broken pieces are really what make us beautiful.

The beauty of the church is not its perfection, but the fact that all of us are bound together by our faith. It is that some of us can love starbucks and some dutch bros yet we serve each other communion. The witness of God's Kingdom is that our faith or holy curiosity about God has brought us all here- it has brought us together.

The daunting task is not to be perfect or be perfect in witness. It is to live in a community together. To be a genuine community- that not only lives and loves together- but struggles together, works together, that hopes together, prays together. And then we take what we do in this community out into our city's community. Thus, becoming the witness God has called us to be. The daunting task of being genuine.

The other good news is that we are not left to figure out how this works or what to do. The church will always need to evolve within its context and time period- the church cannot always just do something because that is how we have always done it- If we did that then we would not be a living testimony to the gospel-

but there is a nice groundwork set for us by Jesus' path of love and liberation. A groundwork laid by our church mothers and fathers, who weren't perfect, but tried to do what they thought was right. Our job is to grow and expand that groundwork- to live in genuine community together- To allow the hope and peace that we learn from Jesus' path of liberation and love to transform us- so that we may be the hands and feet of God in the world- showing his love and grace through our testimony. Our job is to be the living testimony of the gospel. That is what God's church is built on... Peter's, yours, and mine.. Our testimony. Amen.