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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 16:13-20

At times, I have read the portion of Matthew 16 that appears as today's Gospel text and pointed out that Saint Peter is understood by Roman Catholics to be the first pope. Many non-Catholics are surprised to find out that the concept of papacy (or "pope-dom") could be conceived of in this way. But, yes, one can say, given this particular interpretation, that the office of pope has a Scriptural foundation and goes all the way back to Christ himself.

Before Jesus calls Peter the rock on which he will build his church, though, Peter makes a dramatic confession of faith; this, I believe, is as pivotal to today's Gospel text as any claim that Peter (or Peter's successors) deserves any sort of primacy as far as the foundation of the church is concerned. Peter says, in response to Jesus' question of "Who do you say that I am?": "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:15-16). We know now that this was, indeed, the correct answer, but, at the time, it may not have been so self-evident. There was, as our text notes, some confusion as to who was the One, and there are, today, people who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Yes, it is a confession of faith to say that Jesus occupies a specific and exclusive place in the history of salvation.

You might also know that the earliest Christian creed is not the Apostles' or Nicene; rather, it is, simply, "Jesus Christ is Lord." This is even more to the point than Peter's confession, but it captures the essentials nonetheless. Jesus rules over all and in all, and, in accordance with the promise, he conquered death through his death and resurrection; this, again, points to his specific and exclusive place in the history of salvation. No one else besides Jesus is entitled to

such acclamation in a confession of faith.

From the time that he walked the earth, though, Jesus himself offered reminders to the disciples of his impending departure; this departure would necessitate, among other things, someone to carry on Jesus' work and somewhere to do that. And for answering Jesus' question correctly, it would appear that Peter gets to be an integral part of this plan. Remember what Jesus tells him: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..." (Matthew 16:18a). Students of the Greek text will notice a little play on words as the word for rock -- petra -- is related to the name Peter. The fact that Peter alone is offered this very noteworthy distinction is, as I mentioned earlier, evidence to many Christians that Peter and his successors occupy a primacy of leadership within the church. To this day, Roman Catholics say, for example, that the pope occupies the Chair of Peter.

What follows is a further pronouncement from Jesus regarding Peter's special role in the life of not only the church but also the world to come. Jesus says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Not surprisingly, the pope's own regalia include a pair of keys, reflecting the symbolic handing of the keys to Saint Peter right here in Matthew 16. From popular imagery, we also recall Peter standing at the Pearly Gates, ready to either use the keys to unlock the gates and admit someone to heaven, or, presumably, send someone in the other direction! I don't wish to comment extensively on such imagery at this time, other than to say that it probably isn't very accurate...

But when Christians start talking to one another, as has been the case since the dawn of the ecumenical movement in the latter half of the twentieth century, the

role of Peter and his successors in the life of the church needs to be discussed, especially when Roman Catholics are involved. Non-Catholics, in this case, have had to read Matthew 16 and ask themselves if Jesus' exchange with Peter is more than a nice, little symbolic declaration. Catholics, conversely, have had to ask themselves if the institution that the papacy became is in keeping with Christ's intent. Naturally, we, in the Episcopal Church, are somewhere in the middle; we deny the necessity of a pope for the genuine existence of the church, yet we maintain the necessity of the leadership of bishops who are, indeed, successors of the twelve apostles, including Peter.

So, then, is Peter the first pope? From the standpoint of the Roman Catholic faithful, the answer would be "yes," but from the standpoint of a critically-thinking historian, the answer would be "no." The pope, after all, is the Bishop of Rome, and why should Rome enjoy a special place in the life of the church simply because Peter was supposedly the first Bishop of Rome? What matters more is the legacy of faithfulness to the Lord's command that the likes of Saint Peter have handed down to us. And faithfulness is, after all, what helped build the church. People of faith, who responded to the call of the Holy Spirit, gathered together and became the living stones who built themselves upon the Rock, who, we can infer, is Christ as well as Peter. And without the living stones, the church does not exist...no matter how magnificent the rock may be.

Though Matthew 16 may get us thinking about popes and bishops and their unique ministries, we rightly remember the ministry that applies to all of you gathered here -- the ministry of the baptized. Throughout the history of the church, grave errors have occurred when the church is primarily defined in terms of its hierarchy -- popes, bishops, other clergy, et cetera. In fact, the church is made up of all God's children, from peasant to pope, and each has his or her own ministry in which to share. On page 855 of The Book of Common Prayer, you will find a por-

tion of our Catechism that defines, in particular, the ministry of the laity; it says: "The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world..."

This, as you can see, is a very broad definition, and now it is your turn to use your creativity to discover ways of "carry[ing] on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world." That's a pretty tall order, when you think about it. As Christ came into the world to heal the wound of sin that had separated God and humanity, you are called to heal similar sorts of wounds that still remain, whether they involve hatred or disagreement between individuals or age-old prejudices and resentments between segments of society. But God can and will give you the wisdom and courage to carry out these daunting tasks...

Certain ministries will, both in the Episcopal Church and in other churches throughout the world, remain those of ministers ordained to specific sacred duties. When Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven," he may not have had popes and bishops in mind, but I do believe that there may have been someone (like Peter) set apart forever after to bind and to loose and to admonish and to absolve. As the history of the church shows us, this evolved into the orders of ordained ministry as we know them today, with the binding and loosing being the particular calling of bishops and priests.

"But isn't that unfair to the laity?", you might ask. Well, there are a couple of things to take into consideration here. The first thing is purely practical: Would you want this sacred duty carried out by someone who wasn't prepared, examined, trained, and approved to do it? Or, would you want your brain surgeon fixing your car and your mechanic doing your brain surgery? (For whatever reason, I've observed that physicians tend to be lousy mechanics, by the way.) Needless

to say, the answers to those questions should be obvious. The second thing gets us back to our Gospel text itself: We acknowledge the significance of Christ issuing a specific, holy calling to Saint Peter and that everyone called thereafter is called by Christ himself, too. This would be one reason why, in the Episcopal Church, we speak of Holy Orders; they are holy by virtue of Christ's institution.

And those called to Holy Orders, among other duties, equip persons like yourselves through the ministry of Word and Sacrament for continuing "Christ's work of reconciliation in the world" (BCP, p. 855). I'm sure that, after a most unwelcome five-month hiatus from in-person worship, it's as much of a joy for you to come here to be spiritually fed as it is for me, with God's help, to spiritually feed you. Today, as we continue to make our way back to ministry as we have long known and loved it, may we be once again the living stones built upon the Rock, with the Rock being not only Saint Peter, but also Christ himself.

As Jesus says, "The gates of Hades will not prevail against [us]" (Matthew 16:18b); indeed, with all the ministers and ministries of the church alive with the breath of God's Spirit in them, nothing -- not even a pandemic -- will prevail against Christ's church.

Amen.