

*Proper 16, Year A (27 August 2023)*

*St. Matthew 16:13-20*

*Romans 12:1-8*

*Psalms 138*

*Isaiah 51:1-6*

*Preached for the Stone Church of Willow Glen by Nicholas Hurley*

Good morning again, friends, and happy pride! In case you're confused by that, San Jose apparently likes to do things a bit differently, so instead of celebrating pride in July like the rest of the world, we went with August, and this is the weekend. If you are celebrating pride this weekend, or even if you wish you were, then I hope the weekend is as full and life-giving as it can be, and that the celebration helps remind you just how beloved you are of God, particularly in a time when there are so many places in our society that are trying to make you feel less-than.

But today's scripture readings are not about pride, as wonderful a celebration and affirmation of life as it may be. At least, I can't draw the line from Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah to a pride celebration. Perhaps a much more talented and creative theologian than I could do it, but I'm the one in the pulpit today.

If you ask pretty much any theologian or biblical scholar or really anyone who's been a regular church-goer about today's lessons and what the theme of the Gospel reading is, I would be shocked if they fail to mention faith, or rather, *faithfulness* as a key theme.

This probably doesn't come as a shock to you. In fact, if I had to guess, I would say that for those of you who have been regular attendees at this, or any, church, hearing a sermon about faith and Peter's confession of Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God"<sup>1</sup> might feel like old hat to you. It's certainly a sermon I've heard before, and is probably why, 3 years ago, when I was asked to preach and the lectionary texts were these *exact* same readings, I opted to preach on Paul's letter to the Romans rather than the Gospel. It would seem that the Spirit thinks I made the wrong choice back then, because here I am. Or maybe the Spirit thinks I'm ready for that sermon now, and has given me another opportunity at it. Or, perhaps, our

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<sup>1</sup> St. Matthew 16:16

clergy just really like taking vacation during the week known in the lectionary as “proper 16”. Whatever the reason, don’t get your hopes up... there will be no theological mic drops this week, no reading of the text from left field with an unexpected message. This is, indeed, a sermon about faithfulness.

Because you see, Stone Church, it feels to me like we, as a congregation, have been going through somewhat of a crisis of faithfulness in recent times. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not up here questioning anyone’s belief in the triune God, or their commitment to being the best Christian they can, or anyone’s faithfulness to this particular church community that is Stone Church. Perhaps “crisis” is too strong a word, but if I’m being honest, things have been *hard* here, lately. I don’t know about you all, but for me, the last 18 months or so have felt like Stone Church is wandering in a wilderness where in a lot of ways, I’m just “going through the motions”. To top it off, all of this started not long after we returned from the wilderness that was shelter-in-place during the height of the pandemic. To be honest, I feel like I haven’t had a totally “normal” day at Stone since early 2020, in what a lot of people now call “the before-times”. So, I think it might be good to circle back around and re-ground ourselves in faithfulness. At least, that’s what I need, and they say that you often preach the sermon *you* need to hear.

Psalms 138 (appointed for today, though we didn’t read it) begins like this:

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

The Israelites make a point of often praising God for his “steadfast love and faithfulness”, in many more psalms than just number 138 — I count 27 in total mentioning God’s faithfulness, and 54 mentioning God’s steadfast love. That’s just the number of psalms that mention it, not the count of the words themselves — that reaches into the hundreds. This doesn’t even begin to count the rest of the old testament, or mentions of God’s faithfulness in the new. God’s faithfulness and love are *steadfast*. Wholly to be trusted, never changing.

But what about *human* faithfulness? Because as wonderful as it is to understand what God's faithfulness is (and it is indeed wonderful, even necessary for understanding human faithfulness), we aren't God, and as much as we may try, I don't think any of us can say our faithfulness and love are always, 100%, unchangingly steadfast. We have good days, and bad days, days when we are on top of everything, and days when we just can't even. The good news is, that our faithfulness is, as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, a gift from God. Karl Barth calls human faithfulness something that "has to be done", but he also calls it something that "cannot be done naturally"<sup>2</sup>. That's Barth's characteristically long-winded and roundabout way of saying basically the same thing as the apostle Paul — we are given faithfulness as a gift. We can't do it "naturally", or on our own, so God helps us out, God gives us what we need to be faithful.

But Barth pulls out something in his long-windedness that I think is important here. Faith, or faithfulness, is something that "has to be *done*". Faith isn't just a belief, a mental assent to some proposition or set of propositions, it's something we *do*. We tend, in protestant circles, to make a grand distinction between faith and works. And it's absolutely true that we don't *save ourselves* by works; but as the apostle James says, "faith without works is dead"<sup>3</sup>. Being faithful to God involves doing things, just as God's faithfulness to us involves God doing things. As the prophet Isaiah says, "Look to Abraham your father"<sup>4</sup>. How was Isaiah reckoned as righteous? Through faith, yes... but he *showed* that faith by trusting in God and doing what God had asked of him. If Abraham had just said "Yeah, God, I believe you, thanks", I don't think we'd be telling his story today. Even though it may be hard to wrap our head around a triune God, to believe in something for which there is no scientific proof, the intellectual assent is, in some ways, the easy part. The hard part is doing what must be done, and trusting that God will help us see it through.

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*

<sup>3</sup> James 2:26

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 51:2

This past semester, I read an article for one of my classes about “rowing churches” and “sailing churches”. A “rowing” church is one that relies on its own strength and planning, one that sees what resources it has available, and only does those things that can safely be done with those resources. A “sailing” church takes the opposite tack — it discerns what God wants it to do, and then figures out a way to do those things with its resources. It’s a subtle distinction, but the fundamental question is “do we trust ourselves, or do we trust God?”. Now, I don’t think that any church is entirely a rowing church, or entirely a sailing church, but I do think that some churches lean decidedly one way or the other. The same goes for us as individuals, too. Full disclosure, I have a *really* hard time putting my own sail up; I’ve been a rower for as long as I can remember. How do we start to shift from preferring rowing, to preferring sailing?

The prophet Isaiah has some good words for us here, too, when he tells us to “Look to the rock from which you were hewn”<sup>5</sup>. And while Isaiah was referencing Abraham, and his story is an amazing example of what putting up your sail can look like, our Gospel reading for today gives us *another* rock to look to as an example of what to do (and also, probably the best pun in all of scripture, spoken by God himself). I’m talking, of course, about Peter, *the* rock. More so than the story of Abraham, I think that Peter is a much more relatable character for us in the times we find ourselves in — sometimes it seems like Peter goes from faithful to unfaithful; from sailing to rowing; and back again *so fast* that I get dizzy trying to follow him. Today’s reading is no exception.

Peter the *first one* in Matthew’s Gospel to call Jesus the Messiah. Others have called Jesus “Son of God”, but Peter is the first to use that term. But *immediately afterwards*, Peter starts to behave unfaithfully. When Jesus predicts his death to the disciples beginning in the next verse after our reading ends, Peter tells Jesus he doesn’t have to die. Jesus, of course,

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 51:1

rebukes him<sup>6</sup>. Ten chapters after *that*, Peter's denial of Jesus is foretold<sup>7</sup>, Peter falls asleep in Gethsemane<sup>8</sup>, and Peter actually denies Jesus, *multiple* times<sup>9</sup>, in an attempt to save himself.

But this is not the end of the story for Peter. We aren't told how, exactly, but he obviously returns to the fold, and renews his faithfulness to God. If he didn't, he wouldn't be in a position to, among other things, lead the discernment of a replacement for Judas at the beginning of Acts<sup>10</sup>. Like I said, faithful, unfaithful, faithful again. Peter really is all of us.

Even though we don't know exactly what actions Peter takes to return to the fold, we do know *generally speaking* what Peter did. But before I tell you, a brief diversion: you may have been wondering why I opened this sermon with an acknowledgement of San Jose's pride festival. It's because I wanted to be exceedingly clear from the very beginning that you will not be hearing from me what you might hear from far too many Christian pulpits during pride; namely, you will not be hearing condemnation of the LGBTQIA+ community. I wanted to make that clear because what Peter did involves a word that is too often tied up in the ill-advised, and (in my opinion) theologically illiterate condemnations of people who are not white, cis-gendered, males — Peter repented.

Now I suspect that, inside at least some of your heads, you're groaning, or worried that I'm going to go all fire and brimstone. For a lot of us, the word repentance conjures up images of a street preacher standing on a corner shouting things like "the end is at hand!" or "repent, sinner, or burn in hell!" or some hateful screed against queer folk, or immigrants, or black and brown people, or pregnant teens. I can hear that inside your heads, because frankly church, that's where my head goes, too. But repentance is indeed something we are all called to as Christians, just like we are called to faithfulness. In fact, further towards the beginning of

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<sup>6</sup> St. Matthew 16:22-23

<sup>7</sup> St. Matthew 26:34

<sup>8</sup> St. Matthew 26:40

<sup>9</sup> St. Matthew 26:69-75

<sup>10</sup> Acts 1:15-26

Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to "bear fruit worthy of repentance"<sup>11</sup>. I would say that repentance and faithfulness go hand-in-hand.

You see, just like faithfulness, repentance isn't *merely* a changing of your mind, or changing of your feelings. Those are, again, the easy parts. No, repentance is, as Jesus said, *bearing fruit*. Repentance is *doing* what is needed to make right the things that have been messed up — repentance is *acting* like we actually trust that God is who He says He is, and will do what He says He will do.

In today's epistle (which I preached on 3 years ago), Paul says to be "transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God"<sup>12</sup>, which I think sums up repentance quite well. Yes, our minds must be changed — that's a large part of what the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means. But we must discern, *and then do* the will of God. Because Paul doesn't leave it there, with discerning — he carries on immediately to list different *functions* in the body of Christ<sup>13</sup> — being transformed in the mind is followed by *doing*. So, however Peter repented, whatever it was he did between his final denial of Jesus and his leading the selection of Judas' replacement, he *did something*.

Therein lies the good news for us — even in the midst of our unfaithfulness, God remains faithful. Jesus didn't leave Peter after he said "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."<sup>14</sup> He didn't leave Peter after he prophesied Peter's denials. He didn't leave Peter after the denials took place. God, incarnate in the person of Jesus, maintained faithfulness with Peter. And so even if we have fallen into a bit of unfaithfulness ourselves — a bit of attempting to row instead of putting up our sails — God remains faithful to us.

I don't know about you all, but I feel like I've been rowing since March of 2020, and my arms are *tired*. It seems to me that Stone Church, as a community, has been doing a lot of

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<sup>11</sup> St. Matthew 3:8

<sup>12</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>13</sup> Romans 12:4-8

<sup>14</sup> St. Matthew 16:22

rowing these last 3+ years, too. Sometimes it's felt like we've wanted to just fast-forward through it all and get to whatever "good times" we imagine are at the end. I know I sure have. But y'all, don't think I'm up here complaining or condemning. Because my tired arms have given me no choice but to give up rowing, and I think that as a community, we are doing the same. We *are* repenting. Coming to church with a heart and mind open to being changed by what God is saying that day is an act of repentance. Proclaiming on the corner the sinfulness of human trafficking is an act of repentance. Resetting our pastor search process is an act of repentance. And yes, the donation we made to Amigos de Guadalupe is an act of repentance.

So let's keep it up, church. Let's keep those sails hoisted, and trust that no matter how messy things may seem or feel right now, God is sending the winds to us to take us where we need to be. Take it on faith, repent, and be faithful, wherever God may send us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.