

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, August 24, 2008, Year A, Proper 16

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 16: 13-20

"Faith That Endures"

In last week's sermon – I shared with you the story of the family and their home - whose foundation had been utterly poisoned by perils from the outside world. It caused such pain and hardship for them that they – or at least most of them – had to escape; to leave that house and bring their celebrations, their memories, their very lives, to a new house – one with a decidedly more sound foundation. Without a sound foundation – that family was doomed for destruction and death – riddled with poisons, sickness, and untold amounts of pain. I know from speaking with many of you that you have already drawn the connection of that family with our own predicament – and **the slow destruction of the very foundation by the outside world; the culture of today**. It is not easy to watch how that infiltration has affected the very being of the church, the very foundation – the core beliefs. Just like the seeping poison – it didn't happen overnight! We must persist in our prayer, and trust that God in His wisdom will continue to strengthen and guide us going forward.

The foundation is the bedrock, the strength, upon which any building is constructed. A compromised foundation means a weakened building, and on the other hand, a strong foundation means a building that will withstand all of the elements, including time. The **faith**, upon which a person's beliefs are built, much like the foundation of a building, **must also be strong** – to withstand temptation, and yes, **the poisonous demands of today's culture**.

When I think of faith – for me, there is one man that comes to mind. How wonderful it is to receive an affirmation of that man's faith which can be found in today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 51:1-2. The Scripture says: "*Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, who seek the LORD: **Look to the rock from which you were hewn And to the quarry from which you were dug.** Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain.*" **Abraham is the epitome of faith** – and for that reason he is known as a "friend of God."

"Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug." If that isn't foundation talk, I don't know what is! We often talk of the "faith of Abraham" in Bible Studies – but what does that mean? **Well, for one thing – like all of us - Abraham wasn't perfect.** We know that God promised **Abram and Sarai** (their original names) that they would be parents of a great nation – as numerous as the stars in the sky – but their impatience, and their old age, led them to disobedience – and the taking of matters into their own hands, with Sarai's maidservant Hagar. The result – was Ishmael – whose followers, and descendants – the Ishmaelites – have been opposition to the Israelites, even to this day. But, when Abraham and Sarah **listened to God's Words** which said: "*Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him*" (Genesis 17:19) and **then waited upon the Lord**, they were blessed with that long promised son, from whom the Nation of Israel came forth, the line from which Jesus of Nazareth was born.

We know that from reading Genesis chapter 22, Abraham was tested by God, being told to take his son, Isaac, up to a Mountain in the Moriah region, and to kill him there. Abraham was obedient – to the point of even telling his waiting servants that **the two of them would return**. Somehow, Abraham knew that God was as good as His promise – that a great nation would rise from Isaac – but that couldn't happen if he were dead! Somehow – God would save

him. Abraham's faith in God – was incredibly great – and because of his obedience, with faith in God's promise – Isaac was spared – and Isaac had two sons – Esau and Jacob. Jacob would have 12 sons – and be renamed Israel – all because of the faith of Abraham. A faith that endures; **that is unquestionably a solid foundation!**

A strong faith is the necessary foundation if we hope to survive this world! Let me tell you about the son of a minister who learned to believe and have faith by what his Dad told him. After hearing his Dad preach on "*justification*," "*sanctification*" and all of the other "-ations" of the church, this minister's son was ready when his Sunday school teacher asked if anybody knew what "*procrastination*" meant. The boy stepped up and said "I'm not sure what it means, but I know our church believes in it!" I would say that this boy has some work to do on his foundation!

Some major questions arise among many people today – **belief in what; belief in whom?** We as followers of Jesus Christ – like Abraham, believe in God the Father; we also believe that God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world – so that "*whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) In addition, we believe that God sent His Holy Spirit, who as Jesus told us in His words from John 14:26: "*the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.*" If we acknowledge and believe that much, then we also should accept and profess Jesus as our Lord and Savior – making a daily effort to seek a deeper relationship with Him, through prayer and through spending time reading and listening to His Holy Word. Along with this – we **acknowledge and accept the authority of His Holy Word – Holy Scripture** – **and the truth that it bears in our lives and the lives of all faithful believers.** That my brothers and sisters is the foundation on which we live; a firm foundation; **a faith that endures!**

I want you to listen to the words of Jesus that He spoke in Matthew 7:24-27 "*Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who **built his house on the rock.** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet **it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.** Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man **who built his house on the sand.** The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell-- and **great was its fall.**" Like the family we spoke about earlier, if the foundation is faulty – so is its future. If our faith – our belief in Jesus and the Words that He spoke to us, is solid – as if built on the rock – then our future is undeniable. However, if we waffle or waver, unsure of what we believe or if we even believe at all, then we are like the foolish person who built on sand – and our future is like dust in the wind. An even worse scenario is the person who begins with this solid foundation – but "sells out" to the world – "sells out" to the popular thinking of the masses:*

- the cultural drift to universalism – that everyone gets saved,
- and the multiple truths of pluralism;
- or the relativism of "you believe what you want and I'll believe what I want." "We'll all be OK, because we are good people!"

In my honest opinion – that kind of thinking is the poison that destroys. **Faith is supposed to transform culture, but with a weak foundation the opposite happens – culture transforms the faith** and Satan likes it that way! When the foundation weakens – it's easy for him to seep into the sand that remains.

There is only ONE true foundation – ONE Solid Rock on which to stand – all others are but sinking sand! That solid rock is Jesus Christ – the only One who says: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”* (John 14:6) He is our ROCK, our FORTRESS. The Apostle Paul encourages us in our faith in his words from 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15 *“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, **stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught**”* Each one of us - are called to stand firm in Him; with a faith that endures!

Jesus is quite well aware of what others are saying, and professing to believe. He knows what was being said about Him then, just as He does, today. And so, Jesus asks the disciples to share with Him what is being said. Can you just imagine how people came up with some of this stuff? In Matthew 16:14 the disciples tell Jesus that *“Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”* Saying these kinds of statements is not all that far off from what some people are saying today: “Jesus is a great teacher,” “oh, Jesus was a prophet, a preacher and a healer,” or “Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven, but not the only way.” Jesus asked His disciples this question so that they would hear the stark contrast between those statements and the truth which Peter would proclaim when Jesus asked them specifically: **“Who do YOU say that I am?”**

In Matthew 16:16-18, Peter responded *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona (son of Jona), because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”* Let me repeat that last part – but using the original Greek words - that I believe will give us greater insight into this conversation. Jesus said to Simon: *“I also say to you that you are Πέτρος, (Petros) and upon this πέτρα (petra) I will build My church.”* Πέτρος (Petros) means small rock or stone, as opposed to πέτρα (petra) which means rock or bedrock, a large stone - gives us a much clearer indication of what “rock” Christ would build His church upon. There is clearly a distinct difference between the two - and you cannot confuse or misinterpret the intent of Jesus meaning, in that Peter, Πέτρος, would be a solid individual, a leader, whom Jesus would eventually rely on – but certainly **not the foundation of the church**, by any means! We are all like the stones that go into building the church, but the foundation of Jesus’ church would need to be much bigger, much deeper, more reliable, and much more solid! **The statement of faith that Peter made when he announced Jesus to be the Messiah, the “Christ, the son of the living God” would be the “rock,” the foundation of truth that would be the basis, the foundation of the church – a faith that endures.** Saying “Jesus is a great teacher,” “oh, Jesus was a prophet, a preacher and a healer,” or “Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven, but not the only way” or that anyone else is “the Way, the Truth and the Life,” poisons that foundation – weakening it to the point of collapse and rubble. I must confess, it is unnerving and unsettling when those statements come from within the Christian community. It dilutes, and waters down the faith – it is deceitful and false! It is straight from the father of lies!

There comes a time when you have just had enough of these falsehoods, tired of hearing the all of the lies, a time when **the truth must be told – and the faith professed – no matter**

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what! My brothers and sisters in Christ – we are at that time in the life of this church. We as the Body of Christ can continue to ignore the poisons that are flowing through, or we can stand up, trusting in Almighty God for His provision, for His blessing, and for His strength in the days to come – like Abraham, relying on our faith in Him that somehow we will make it through; somehow we will continue to proclaim **the ONE TRUE GOSPEL of Jesus Christ – undaunted, undeterred, and undiluted.** As The Apostle Paul encourages the church in Ephesians 6:13, this message is for us as well; let us “*take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.*” Let us be confident that Jesus “*is the Christ, the Son of the Living God*” (Matthew 16:16) and let us, together, boldly, with blessed assurance, profess the faith that endures!

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was
buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.

He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.