

Third Sunday After Pentecost, June 1, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. +

Scripture: Mt. 16:13-18

"A Church Built on the Rock"

BUILT ON GARBAGE

Some years ago there was a village in upstate New York that had just outside the village limits a land fill, a garbage dump. And when that land fill became full a developer bought it. He wanted to make some money, so he hauled in dirt and rocks and covered that land fill. He packed and tamped it down, and then began to lay out a subdivision. He put beautiful streets and curbs and planted trees, and nobody could tell that it had ever been a garbage dump. Then he began to build houses, lovely houses. And families moved in, and it was a happy beautiful community.

But after a number of years, the subsoil began to give way, the curbs began to crack; the corners on the houses began to sag, roofs began to bow in, and the walls began to have fishers in them. After a while it got so bad, that people started moving out, and before long that community was abandoned and forlorn. Now the old timers who had lived a nearby the land fill simply shook their heads, they knew what had happened. Those homes had been built on garbage. They had not been built on a firm foundation.

A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR LIFE

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells us how to build a firm foundation for life. Jesus' words are for every person, family, community and certainly for every church. Jesus said, *"Whoever hears these words of mine and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock, and when the rain fell, and the floods came and the wind beat on that house, it still stood."*

If a church is to weather the storms, it must be built on the rock. What is this rock? We find the word, "rock" used again in Matthew. Please turn with me to **Matthew 16:13-18**. We read, *"Now when Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, saying, 'Who do people say that I the Son of man am?' And they said, Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still other, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered and said, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."*

THE SOLID FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

Jesus asks the most important question for all people, *"Who do you say that I am?"* And Simon Peter says, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Jesus commends Peter for his answer but then He says, *"You are Peter and on this rock, I will build this church."* Some people think the church is built upon Simon Peter, because Jesus calls Simon Peter a rock and then says upon this rock He will build His Church. But Jesus is simply making a play on words. The true "rock" is Jesus Christ, Himself. Peter becomes like a rock because of Christ in his life. But the Rock of the Church is Jesus, for He is the only Messiah and Son of God. And it is this statement of truth concerning Jesus' identity that is the key to it all. You see the Church is not built on Simon Peter, it is built on the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter himself knew this. But how do we know?

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Please turn with me to the Apostle Peter's own words found in **1 Peter 2:4-6**: "***Come to Him a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."***"

Or how about St. Paul? What did the Apostle Paul say?. **1 Cor. 3:11**: "***For no other foundation can a man lay except that which is Jesus Christ.***" There is no one or anything else, friends. Notice, too, who it is who is ultimately the builder of the Church? After Jesus affirms Peter's statement He says, '***and on, this rock, I will build my church.***' Notice Jesus didn't say you, Peter, are going to build the church. He didn't say you or I will build His Church, Jesus said that He will build His Church.

You see it is not our responsibility to build Christ's Church. Sure, we are called to make disciples, we are called to preach and teach, but it is Jesus who ultimately builds the Church through His Holy Spirit. We are called simply to be faithful. You see it's our response to the Lord's ability that makes the difference.

That means the Church can't fail. The Church can't fail because the builder of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ. Flesh and blood cannot build the Church. Jesus said, "***Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, Peter, but my Father in heaven.***" It is God's work to reveal who Jesus is, and it is God's work to build His Church.

THE SAVING FAITH OF THE CHURCH

But if Jesus is the sure foundation of the Church and the builder of the Church, what is the Church built with? The Church of Jesus Christ is built with saving faith.

Recall again Jesus asked, "***Who do people say that I am?***" People say all sorts of things. But then Jesus looks at them and says, "***but who do you say that I am?***" That, my friends, is the most important question.

And Simon Peter, who was always so quick to speak opened his mouth and said, "***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***"

What is the saving faith of the church? First of all, it is a personal conviction about Christ. Jesus said, "***Who do you say that I am?***" In other words, who is Jesus Christ to you? It doesn't matter who He is to me or to St. Bart's but who is Jesus to you? The saving faith of the Church is based in a personal conviction about Christ. Simon Peter said, "***You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*** Jesus said, "That's right Simon, but don't get a big head, you didn't figure it out. My Father showed that to you." "***Flesh and blood didn't reveal it to you, but my Father which is in heaven revealed it to you.***" The fact is my preaching will never convince you that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Only the Holy Spirit can show and convince you of that.

Secondly, a saving faith includes a personal confession of Christ. Listen Simon Peter not only believed it but He confessed it. He said it openly and publicly, "***You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.***" You see if you're going to be a follower of Jesus Christ, conviction must be followed by confession. Jesus Christ said "***if you are ashamed of me, I will be ashamed of you.***" (Lk. 9:26). But Jesus also said, "***If you will confess me before men, then I will confess you before my Father in Heaven.***" (Lk. 12:8).

And a personal confession of Christ, leads to a personal conversion through Christ.

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Do you know what Simon means? Simon means unstable. But Jesus gave Simon a new name – Peter, "*Petra*" which means "rock." The one who'd been so unstable that the devil could sift him like wheat is now going to be stable because of THE Rock, Jesus Christ. He doesn't get a piece of the rock, he is a piece of the rock. I mean he becomes a different person. You see, when there is a conviction about Christ, and confession of Christ, there is also conversion through Christ.

It's when the Lord Jesus literally changes you from the inside out, just as He changed Simon Peter. That's why the Bible says "*if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation.*" Going to church does not make you a disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus means that you are radically changed for all eternity. The truth is if Jesus hasn't changed your life, you don't have Jesus.

The problem today is that you can join some churches easier than you can some social organizations or country clubs. In fact, many churches have become places where anybody can get in and nobody gets out. What started out as a sheep fold has become a zoo. No, my friends, the Church is not a zoo made up of a hodgepodge of vagabonds and charlatans. It is the body of Christ, made up of those who are born again, those who have a conviction that Jesus is the Christ, that He is the Son of the Living God. That my friends is the saving faith of the church.

THE SPECIAL FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH

But there isn't just *the solid foundation* of the Church and *the saving faith* of the Church, there is also *the special fellowship* of the Church.

Jesus said, "*...on this rock I will build my Church.*" The Greek word used here for church is "*ekklesia*" and it literally means, my "*called out ones*;" people whom Christ has called out from every race, tongue, tribe, and nation; rich and poor, young and old, black and white; people from every spectrum of society. This is the special fellowship of the Church.

You see the Church is like a a spiritual house. God the Father is the architect, the Lord Jesus is the foundation and builder. Saving faith is what the Lord uses to build and specifically that means that he uses ordinary men and women who trust in Jesus.

This building is not the church. It's just a sheep shed. In fact, we are called spiritual stones. Remember **1 Peter 2:5**? Peter understood what Jesus said. That's why Peter wrote **1 Peter 2:5**, concerning his brothers and sisters, "*living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.*"

Did you get that? Christ is the foundation. And we build upon this foundation when He takes each of us and builds us together. He puts us all together, stone upon stone. And He builds a spiritual house. Not a church building. Nothing wrong with church buildings, but some people confuse the church building with the church.

I heard about a man who was filling a form one time and they asked him, "What is your church preference?" He said, "red brick." Now he had confused the building with the church. And we do that all the time when we say I'll see you down at the church. Don't we all do that from time to time? But the truth is the church is not bricks and stones, but it is living stones, built upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let me just say a couple of things about the special fellowship of the church. First of all we are built together. You're a stone, he's a stone, she's a stone, they're a stone, we are built together. No body ever saw a one brick building. That's why you can't be a one man church.

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We need each other if we're going to be part of a church. The fact is you can shove a brick around, but it's hard to shove a building around, isn't it? That, my friends, is where the power comes, that's where the strength comes, we are built together. What is a lone brick lying out on the ground? Not much, but together we are part of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. But not only are we built together, we are also bound together.

You know a building is not a not a stack of stones. It is stones fitted to one another and bound together by mortar. You see, I belong to you. You belong to me. We belong to one another. There are stones that make up this physical building, which is not the church but the church house. And these bricks on the outside, one brick rests upon another brick and so forth. In the same way we are bound together so that we rest upon those members who have gone before and we will hold up those who come after us.

Thus, the Lord has taken each of us, each brick and stone and He has put us together and we are built together and we are bound together, and therefore we are blessed together. Built, bound, and blessed for what? Peter says, "*a spiritual house.*" Do you know what that means? A house for the Holy Spirit, a house to worship the living God.

ALL FOR WORSHIP

I heard about a church where it was rumored that the President of the United States was going to come and worship. And word got out that the President was coming to the church. As you might suspect, everyone was all excited about the President's visiting. But the truth was, he was going to be in town, but he wasn't going to that church.

One lady who'd never been to that church for many years, called up and said to the pastor, "Oh, is it true that the President of the United States is going to be present Sunday morning? If so I want to come and how could I get a reserved seat?" He said, "Ma'am, the President won't be here, but the King of Kings will and that ought to be good enough for you."

My friends, the King of Kings is here. He is here because this church is built on the rock of a sure foundation, a saving faith and a special fellowship! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!