

### **Matthew 16:15-20**

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 him, '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. 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.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

### **“I Am the Church: The Power of One”**

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**November 6, 2011**

The transition into where they are and what they've done to how it is for probably most of us, maybe even all of us, I would say that I think it's true, I can't prove it, and you'll tell me if it isn't. pretty much true for most of us that there are times when we are not so sure that we're much of anything. Maybe we think we're perhaps not much at all. Maybe nobody. Maybe nothing special. Maybe a little like Charlie Brown who said, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and I ask, 'Where have I gone wrong?' and a voice comes back to me, and the voice says, "It's going to take more than one night." Or maybe we're a little like Lily Tomlin who said, "I always wanted to be somebody. Perhaps I should have been more specific." Or maybe it's a corporate thing, like the Orlando Magic basketball general manager Pat Williams said about his team's record in 1992. He said, "We can't win on the road. We can't win at home. As general manager, I just can't figure out where else to play." Or perhaps it's about other people, like our spouse, like the woman who paid for an ad in the classified section of her newspaper - "Husband wanted." She received over 200 letters, not to mention the phone calls. They all said the same thing, every one of them. They said, "You can have mine."

We're nothing special, nobody. Maybe it's just a dull sense of not doing anything that is particularly good. Maybe like Mary, who saw herself as just a peasant woman, or Joseph as a small-town builder, or Amos who was a tree-trimmer or Isaiah who somehow heard call in the middle of a funeral service, "Whom shall we send? Who will go for us?" Or Jeremiah, who said he's too young to be a prophet. Maybe it's just that we tried to do some things that haven't worked out so well, and maybe the things we tried were considered by some to be superfluous, or maybe even worse, the things we tried just weren't good, or maybe it is the case that they were viewed as worse than good, and we felt unappreciated or maybe even under-appreciated, or perhaps even at times viewed with suspicion. "I'm nobody, I'm nothing." Maybe it was the memory of something we've done that can't leave us, that we cannot shake it, to the point that it defines us. "So you're the one that ruined the office party with the bad joke last year." "You're the one who Bill Bucknered the ground ball in the World Series and lost the game" or maybe "You're the one who missed the sign and tried to do what shouldn't have been done, casting the rest of us in a bad reputation." Maybe it was a grade on a test that mattered, that determined our future. Maybe we should have studied harder, and we knew it. Or maybe you were

the singer in the choir, the one who put the Yo-Ho in the Jolly Roger that wasn't in the printed music, and that was a long trip back to Missouri, if you were the one who did that. And you're going on a bus. So you're nobody, you're nothing, you're pushed to the back of the picture when the cameras are clicking or to the bench when the game is on the line, or put in your place when there's really no place to put you, except out of the way.

I described one such as that. His name was Simon, simple Simon. He was so simple you might call him impulsive, you might suggest that it was his desire to be somebody that led him to the point that in his life he was considered by those who knew him best to be a nobody. They said he was violent. Once he over-reacted to a situation, and even his best friends pulled back from him when he did what he did, and pretended they didn't even know him. It was road rage of a different kind. It was an assault with a deadly weapon that almost cost a man his life. They said he was pathetic and inappropriate and a case could be made to support that truth of that claim. His religious exuberance overtook his reason. His desire to please trampled his common sense. Sometimes people wondered, did he have any sense at all? And worst of all was his pretense of professing a faith, as he claimed allegiance to the things he allegedly believed in, and then to disclaim him all at once. Simon tried to kill a Roman general with a sword. Simon wanted his whole body to be washed by the Christ when Jesus just wanted to wash his feet. Simon said he would always be loyal to Jesus, but denied knowing him three times. Simon was a nobody, and for most of his life the only value you could say that he had was by other people who knew him and said, "Well, you know, there's a bad example." That's who he was.

But then somebody believed in him. Somebody tapped him on the shoulder and he was knighted. Somebody put his hand on his head and ordained him for something or other. Somebody looked at him and said, "Simon, your name is Peter now. Petros, that means rock. Make a name for yourself, son. Be the rock foundation. Great things can be built upon you. Here are the keys to the kingdom, and you're a key player here." You'd think that would have done it. You'd imagine that that would have turned him from the nobody he was, and it didn't.

Do you know, in 1986 the state of Nevada had an election, the ballot asking Democrats to vote for a Democrat for the state treasurer. The choices, five candidates, the list of the five candidates, and then a space below marked "None of the above" and guess what? "None of the above" finished first. If Peter had run for dogcatcher unopposed, he would have lost. If someone had said of him "He is a rock," his friends would have laughed. And when he came to the table with his friends, Jesus took out the bread and broke it and he gave it to them, when Jesus took the cup and blessed it, he gave it to them, when Jesus met we think that was the beginning of the church that was gathered for the first time at the table, it was a Passover meal, it was the remembrance of "back in the day", you know back then when they put the blood of the lamb over the doorpost of their house and the angel of the Lord, the angel of death passed over them, and they were spared, that was the Passover. They remembered the Passover. And Jesus said, "Well, you're not going to be spared. If you're going to be part of this, you're not going to be spared. This is my body, this is my blood, the blood of the New Covenant. I live in you." And he told the disciples, "You're going to suffer for your faith." They were not spared, and Peter the Rock was still

a coward, impulsive, inappropriate. Later on, not a whole lot later on, a woman said to him, "You're one of them, aren't you? You are part of the group, I can tell by your dialect, you were part of it" and he swore at her, he said some things that we couldn't say in church to her, with children present. "I don't know him, I never knew him, I had no knowledge of what you're talking about, you ---" and that's what we can't repeat. You can look it up. "Leave me alone."

And Simon was simple and Peter was no rock. If he had gotten the keys to the kingdom then, he would have dropped them. That first last supper, you know, it meant nothing to him. First last supper with Jesus meant nothing to Peter. It was the second last supper, after Jesus was gone, that Simon became the rock and Simon picked up the keys to the kingdom. It was the second last supper. In fact it happened on the beach, a stranger picked up fish and ate it. Picked up bread and broke it and gave it to them. They saw the risen Christ in the stranger on the beach. Truth is, he did become a rock, and that was about the time. Fact is, he was the foundation, the church became the church because of him. There would have been no church had there not been Peter. Petros. Legend has it that Peter spoke with an eloquence that was, he was a compelling witness to the truth that he came to believe in it as the word of life, the bread of life.

It's a matter of public record he became an advocate for the light and not only did he speak of the light, he became the light. He baptized people in Jesus' name. He spoke the Gospel with forcefulness and power. He became an advocate. You won't find anyone more important than Peter. Maybe Paul. They made him a bishop, even. Oh, my goodness. They were awestruck with the work he did as he traveled with his wife spreading the Gospel. They made him a saint. From Simon to Peter to Saint Peter. He was a legend. He was heroic. People have written books about him. The place where he was buried became the church where the Pope now sits, it's called Saint Peter's Cathedral, it's one of the most beautiful churches in the whole world, and he died, and he suffered for his faith. He died a martyr, upside down on the cross in honor of Jesus whom he considered God's son. And something happened when Jesus told him, "You are the rock, and upon this rock I'll build my church." Some think that's when it happened. Some think it happened when he was at the table with his friends. When Jesus said to them and to him, "Do this in remembrance of me." But it didn't happen then. That's the point. It didn't happen then. There came a time, and it was a time when Jesus wasn't there, that was when Peter got it.

You know, for all of us there comes a time when we look beyond ourselves for a word that reminds us of what we can do? What we can do. Like a six-foot-eight man who applied for the job of lifeguard. Stepped up to the desk and said, "I'm here to see about the lifeguard job" and the recruiter said, "Can you swim?" and the six-foot-eight applicant replied, "No, but I can wade out real far." I may not be able to make a splash on Broadway, but I can make a wave down there at the Lincoln Center. And I can't guarantee I'll end the day at the top of the list, but I'll guarantee you that I'll finish my assignment, and at the end of the day you'll see my name written on the list that they posted.

And there comes a time when our focus changes from what we have done to what we will do, or at least what we will try. From what we can't do, to what we can. From our deficiencies to our assets. Tony Campolo was right when he said, "What you commit yourself to be will change what you are, and make you into a completely different person." It's not the past, but the future that defines us. And Leonard Sweet had it down correctly, "Christianity is a religion that is less wrapped up in ritual and observance than it is in rapt attention to what God is doing in the world, so that we can beat a path to where Jesus is living his resurrected presence."

And so we have beaten a path to where Jesus is living his resurrected presence here. And that means there is something that pulls us to look for something beyond us. It means that the world may have our hands, but our soul belongs to someone else. Our soul belongs to God. It means religion is a question what to do with the feeling of the mystery of living. Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us. It means to be is to stand for. It means that our job is not to see through others, but rather to see others through whatever they're going through, so they can face it with our help. It means that our role is not to make the world change by our action, but to be, by our action, the change we believe the world can become. It means that we do not overlook the mistakes we've made in the past and we do not rest satisfied with yesterday's victories but we hear the call of life that offers us to find a way of doing what goes on in the world where the resurrected Christ is present. And that's what pulled Peter from the pathetic nobody that he was, to the surprising somebody he became. The Last Supper, with the risen Christ at the table, the church gathered, from the table then the church scattered. One upon one, each of us, can say it.

Each of us, "I am the church. I am somebody. Okay, so I looked back and sensed some things I could have done better than I did. I speculate on ways that I've lived my days and have given thought to the idea that I have failed myself or the people I care about. Or I look out at the world and I think I have let down my intent to live up to the highest ideals. Yes, I know that God knows my failures to perform, and am filled with remorse about that. I ponder all the things I could have done that I didn't do, and should have done. I was told I was the key to the whole thing, and I dropped it. And I came to the table in this place, as you will, and I look up at the pastor, or the person who served me one on one, and I learned again the most important truth. I am the church. God is invested in me. I am the church, and I am key to its future. No matter how unworthy I feel myself to be sometimes, and I do, I am the church because I come to the table in the absence of Jesus but the presence of the risen Christ, and I hear those words, 'Take this, in remembrance of me,' and I realize I have beaten a path to where Jesus is living his resurrected presence here and beyond, and I walk down the aisle, I walk away from the building, I get into my car or my bus, and into the traffic later today. I find myself back at school, or I'm standing in line at a store, buying another can of coffee because I'm almost out, or I'm at an office and something comes up, it's an ethical thing, and I know there is what I can do that is easy and there is what I can do that is right, the right thing to do, and I realize that is what must be done because someone handed me a cup and a piece of bread and said, 'Jesus said, take this in remembrance of me.' And it wasn't the preacher, dressed for prayer, or some bishop in a distant office, and it wasn't the mellow voice of the soloist

who sang loud to raise the dead, or the choir that simulated angel wings flapping in the loft. And it wasn't the man or woman who gave me the bread. And it wasn't the people who are paid to work at the church. It wasn't the usher who shuffled the deck and passed out the bulletin like a blackhawk card sharp dealing a royal flush, that sent the collection plates skidding across the pew like flying saucers. They're important. But it hit me, and it hit me hard - so I am important. I am a rock. I am the one who got the cup and the bread and who was told, 'Take this, remember me.' And walking out of worship, the church gathered, the church becomes scattered, the piece of bread, the little cup of juice, the table, the body and soul of Christ resurrected, turned Simon into Peter, turns me into one who will ask, 'How can I make Jesus proud?' by how it is I live my life, because I am somebody. I am the church.' And that is something every one of us has every right to say.