

Pentecost 15, Proper 16A  
August 24, 2008

RCL  
Exodus 1:8-12,10  
Psalm 124  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

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All Saints Episcopal Church

“You are Peter,” our Lord said, “and on this rock I will build my church.”

For us in this Church of All Saints, this is a day of beginnings. School starts this week and so our Sunday School will begin a new year.

If you have not already seen one of the atriums of the Good Shepherd School for our youngest students, please go and look into the room that used to be the Choir Room. This is now the atrium for our 6 to 10-year olds and it will be blessed for its new beginning this morning at 10 a.m. You are welcome to come for that blessing.

Speaking of blessings, the spirit with which the teachers and parents of our little ones now provide for their learning about the faith is a wonderful thing to behold and a great benefit to all the members of All Saints.

When you see Jan Fritzsche and Sandy Kynerd and Lisa Czerny and now also Debbie Talbott-Miller, please thank them for their commitment and their huge investment in time and energy to the Good Shepherd School.

This morning we will enjoy pancakes, prepared and served by the Youth Group and their leader, Sally Catalano. Please join us for breakfast in the parish hall after worship. The Youth Group, though quite small at this point, is determined to continue as a group and to seek new members to join them as they learn and work and worship together as a part of this community of Christians at All Saints. So, as always, our children and young people lead the way.

There will be many events marking the beginning of the fall season and most of them will involve eating and fun, so plan to come.

We are being the Church, gathered for worship, fellowship, learning, gathered to care for each other, and then dispersed to serve God in our homes, our neighborhoods, our places of work, acting in Jesus' name so that others may come to know his saving grace in their lives, too.

In this familiar gospel reading this morning we are reminded that Jesus built the Church upon a rock, a rock named Peter.

There's a play on words here, of course. In Greek the name Peter is “Petros” which means rock. The English word “petrified” comes from the same word.

Peter has just declared that Jesus is more than a great preacher like John the Baptist, more than one who can make the dead live like Elijah, more than a prophet like Jeremiah. Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited savior of God's people and, even more than that, he is the Son of the living God.

Peter has said it out loud, with Peter's own enthusiasm and passion. He has said it without hesitation. And this is what Jesus has been looking for – the foundation of faith on which to build his Church.

But as faithful and courageous as Peter is, he is far from perfect. Again and again Peter fails to get it right as he tries to understand Jesus' teaching. But with courage he continues trying.

This is the disciple who tried to walk to Jesus on the water but began to slip under the waves. Still, he knew Jesus would save him if he called out for help.

This is the disciple who tried to keep Jesus from saying he must die, and to whom Jesus responded "Get behind me, Satan." Peter loved Jesus and the idea of losing him was too painful.

He is the one who did not want to allow Jesus to wash his feet because he revered his teacher so much, and again he was reprimanded for not understanding that Jesus must be known as servant of all.

Peter was compulsive. He wanted to build shelters on the mountain so as to keep Jesus and Moses and Elijah there as long as he could, but the miracle of the Transfiguration was a fleeting experience and was soon over.

And Peter had to carry the burden of lacking the courage to stay with Jesus in his time of trial. He did actually venture into the courtyard of the high priest's palace, but he could not bring himself to admit that he was Jesus' friend, for fear of being killed with him.

So the fact that Jesus chose Peter as the rock on which to build his Church opens the way for all of us to be a part of that rock.

Jesus can build his church on us, you and me, despite all our weaknesses and our failings, when we have two things that Peter had: faith that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, and the courage to pick ourselves up when we fall short of the mark and to try again to live the way Jesus would have us live.

That's all it takes. Faith in him and trust that he will help us get it right - someday.

Even though Peter denied knowing Jesus at the time when he most needed a friend, there was forgiveness for Peter later. Remember when Jesus returned as the risen one – he was cooking fish on the beach when they came in from fishing – and he said to Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter said, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

He asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” once for each time Peter had denied knowing him, and Jesus allowed Peter the chance to declare that he loved him. It was a release for Peter of the burden of guilt. Forgiveness. Such a powerful thing.

So we are the Church. We are God’s agent of forgiveness in the world. And we have all the gifts St. Paul cited in his letter to the Church in Rome.

There are those among us who show us their deep faith, who minister to the sick and the lonely, who teach – both children and adults, who call us to remember the needs of the community and the world, who set an example by giving of their possessions and of their time and energy for the common good, who lead by example and as servants among us, who follow work to its completion, who serve with cheerfulness, who remind us of our blessings and who move forward in hope, who wait upon the Lord and trust in God’s goodness. There are those among us who model self-giving love and forgiveness.

All of these qualities are present at All Saints. I trust that I will find them at St. Andrew’s in Massachusetts, too.

We are the Church and we have all the gifts that we need for ministry. But don’t forget that the Church is built upon human frailty. Peter. And us. And while we bring our gifts, we also bring our failings.

We bring them every time we worship and we present them to God as part of our offering. As the gifts of money and bread and wine are brought forward, so are all of us brought forward, our whole lives, the good with the bad, the successes with the failures, and all that we have and all that we are is placed on the altar for God’s healing and God’s blessing.

When we hold out our hands to receive the Body and Blood of our Savior, And when we take and eat the blessed bread and drink the blessed wine, we take into ourselves all that he has and all that he is, for our healing and for our hope and for our courage in trusting God to lead us in whatever lies ahead.

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.  
Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria