

Rock, Paper, Scissors

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Third Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 16:13-20

This summer I visited two churches while on vacation. Both offered inspiring and thoughtful and engaging worship services. The choirs, like ours, were on break for the summer and the special music offered was lovely. The people seemed to be friendly and each congregation had interesting things going on. One congregation was a member of our denomination while another was a member of a close cousin. I strayed, temporarily, mind you, from Presbyterianism only because the local church didn't have a worship service that would fit my schedule. The point of telling you all this this morning has to do with the sermons themselves. Both were fine, well-crafted and thoughtfully delivered. One centered on the nature of who God was and what it meant to follow God, to recognize God all around. The congregation had experienced three deaths in recent weeks and you could tell there was a tenderness and sensitivity in the air. The Moses story was recalled, Moses encountering God for the first time and being commanded to remove his sandals. The preacher even removed her shoes in the pulpit to make the point about holy ground. My black wingtips will stay on this morning, but the point was vivid and well-made. That was one sermon, pastoral. The other sermon was as nearly the opposite as could be. It was preached in the middle of the worst of the violence in Gaza. If the choices are pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli, and I don't think that has to be the dichotomy, this sermon nonetheless spoke with great solidarity and passion for the Palestinian people. Though centered on the seeming hopelessness of the war, it expressed a sense of hope as the preacher connected earlier seemingly hopeless situations – Northern Ireland and South Africa – and the potential for reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians now. Having just come from the Presbyterian General Assembly where we had debated, sometimes hotly, this very issue, I can't say that I was ready to hear more about this on my vacation, but I appreciated the preacher's prophetic passion and his attempt to link faith with the world in where we are living, a message of peace and justice and reconciliation. One church, two congregations, two vastly divergent messages, yet both uttered by linking the moment, the context, to the ancient faith story and the ancient faith tradition to the calling of the people in that room – whether to pastoral action or prophetic action – to action. Now each of these experiences was a mere snapshot in the life of that particular community. The next week I might have heard something more pastoral in the one place and more prophetic in the other. That's not the point; that's not what has had me thinking. In the General Assembly itself, we debated the Middle East, and we

debated with equal intensity the issue of marriage. You will hear more about that this fall. We also adopted a new statement of faith and thought about other important matters – drones, gun control, human trafficking. At the same time we sang hymns from a new Presbyterian hymnal, we heard about evangelism efforts, we learned about new church school curriculum. And behind every moment, generally unspoken, was the same question behind the two sermons, the same question behind a day long staff retreat we held this past week, the same question you may have with you today, even if you are not fully aware of it. There is a more central question than that question, and both are asked this morning in our gospel lesson. They go hand in hand. Who is this Jesus? Who is he? And what is the purpose and nature of the community, the church, that gathers around him? The first question is entirely more important – who is Jesus? – but the second one matters, because it helps give shape and form to what we do. It is present every time we gather and every time we disperse. It is present as sermons are prepared, as lessons are planned, as church budgets are crafted, as parking lots are dug up and replaced, as visits are made to the hospital, as kids prepare to go to church camp. It is present in one congregation I visited as questions about faith and the Middle East are asked and it is present in another congregation I visited as questions about how we care for one another in the face of grief are asked, and I daresay both questions are present in both places, as they are here, as we navigate what it means to live with faith in the world and we nurture and care for one another in times of hardship. We get both questions this morning from Matthew's gospel. Jesus has been doing all kinds of things, healing, teaching, feeding large crowds of people, walking on water. If you read Matthew's gospel, as we have been all summer and as we will do throughout the fall, you will notice it moving from one occasion to the next quickly, establishing first who Jesus is and then establishing who the church will be because of who he is. And as the crowds gather, he knows that people are talking, offering opinions on this one who does these things and who inspires the common people and who riles up the political and religious authorities. So he pauses, ever so briefly from his packed agenda, and asks his disciples about perceptions. Who do the crowds say that I am? Various answers... John the Baptist, with his dire warnings; Elijah or Jeremiah or any of a number of prophets saying that God is here and on the move. We are not told this morning how Jesus processed these answers. We simply know he moved to a new question, directed not at the perceptions of the masses, but of his inner most circle. Who do YOU say that I am? Who? And Simon Peter, Peter the rock, says that you are the Messiah, the anointed one, the savior, the son of the living God. No John the Baptist, no prophet, but the one, THE one, come from God, to save. And Jesus responds in well-known words, commending Peter for his insight and establishing the calling of the church, giving it power and hope and promise. No discussion from me this morning on the role of Peter, *Petros*, the rock, and did Jesus have a line of succession in mind of were his words indicative of the truth of Peter's testimony. What I do want to connect is Jesus' identity – the Messiah, the Son of the living God – and the calling of the church to share that good news, to live it out. Upon the

promise of who I am I will build my church, Jesus is saying, through Peter, yes, yet through all of the disciples, down to this group of disciples, gathered here, in mid-August, far away from northern Israel in both time and space but not so far away, really. We are asked the same question, and we respond, and then we ask the follow up – who are we as a gathered community of faith, the church, because of who he is, and what are we called to do, how are we called to live.

Because of who he is, we are called to...

Baptize babies, as we have done this morning, and remember our own baptism and how it welcomes us into the family of faith

Stand in solidarity with the people of Ferguson, Missouri, with those ostracized and suspected simply because of the color of their skin and joining with all those seeking racial reconciliation and justice

Comfort those who grieve, who suffer, who struggle, who miss loved ones, who journey with depression or addiction

Be concerned about events in the Middle East, to be pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, and to speak out for peace and justice and reconciliation

Send our kids to camps and conferences, hoping they will learn something of the faith as they are reminded what beloved children of God they are

Work for the improvement of Rochester City Schools, and stand with our ecumenical and interfaith partners as we seek the welfare of the city, our city, where we are called to witness and serve

Break bread and share cup, at the Lord's Table or at a picnic table with church friends or at the family table, all the while remembering those who have no food and no drink and no shelter

Those two sermons I heard were simply microcosms of who the church is and what we are called to be, to care for one another and to care for a broken world, all the pastoral and prophetic things we are called to do because this Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. If we keep that vision in front of us, every prayer we utter, every step we take, every plan we

plan, will be blessed by Jesus, who has called us out and called us into and who calls us ever forward, all of us, built on this rock, this strong, tender, compassionate, reconciling rock. Amen.