A Chip Off the Old Block
This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on Sunday, August 21, 2011.

**Matthew 16:13-20**

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 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. 18 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. 19 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.” 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. *The Gospel of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

Grace and peace to you, in the name of Jesus, our Messiah, the Son of the living God. Amen.

Jesus and his disciples have come into the district of Caesarea Philippi, a gentile city about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has been healing and teaching along the way. He has been confronted, many times, by the Scribes and Pharisees, and people are wondering, talking—surmising about who he is: about his *identity* and *purpose*. Who *IS* this peasant-small-town-healer-teacher-miracle-worker, anyway?

He asks the disciples: “What are folks saying about me?” Well, John the Baptist, resurrected; Elijah, or one of the prophets. “And, what do you say?” Jesus asks them.

Who knows how long the silence lasted before Peter breaks it. “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” *Blessed are you, Simon, Son of Jonah!* “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Whenever I read these words, I can’t help but picture St. Peter’s Basilica, having traveled there many years ago, now.

It is at the center of Vatican City in Rome, a monument to Peter; the largest basilica in the world. Supposedly built over St. Peter’s tomb, it is amazing to behold, inside and out.

Here’s a little church history lesson for you. Scripture and tradition suggest that Peter was martyred in Rome—around 64 AD at one of the great imperial circuses. His body was taken outside the walls of the arena, and there, on the side of what was called the *Vatican Hill*, he was buried.

Tradition suggests that a small chapel was built over his tomb, which became a place of pilgrimage for early Christians. Over two hundred years later, Emperor Constantine built a basilica dedicated to St. Peter in this same place. And in 1506, a new basilica was built to replace it yet again, which is the one standing today.
The Vatican has long held the tradition that Peter was *buried* under the basilica, but even as late as the 1930s, there was no proof. Until in 1939, just below the floor level of the basilica, excavation discovered ancient Roman graves, and directly beneath the altar, they found a large burial site, signs of a tomb and small altar, and remains that some say confirm the long-held belief that Peter truly is buried there.

“*Tu es Petrus*” in giant Latin gilded lettering on the cupola, these words greet all who enter St. Peter's Basilica. “You are Peter—Petrus (rock)—and on this rock I will build my church (assembly).” I can’t help but wonder, what Peter would think of this grand structure built in his name. I have a feeling he would be more than a little surprised.

Through my encounters with Peter in the gospels, “rock” is not the description that comes to mind. **Firey, yes, passionate and persuasive, mm hmm, but an **unmoving and unchanging rock** he was not. He often missed the point Jesus was trying to make; he wavered, he doubted, he denied Jesus, he was one of those who fell asleep when Jesus told him to keep watch—Peter is no perfect, unmovable rock. And yet, in some way, somehow upon his **confession**, Jesus says the church will be built.

I’ve heard it suggested that in naming Peter the rock, Jesus was making a joke—an exaggeration about Peter who only a little earlier in Matthew’s gospel "sank like a stone" when he tried walking on the water. But in any case, Peter, this questionable “rock” becomes a part of the foundation of the church. **His faith, his confession, certainly inspires the faith of others.**

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, today, we are the church, in part, because of him. And because of countless other faithful Christians who have been foundational in our faith, too. “Blessed are you,” Jesus tells him, but listen closely, as Jesus continues: “for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,” which is a little like saying, “Blessed are you, because God has opened your eyes.”

Notice, Jesus did not say: “Blessed are you for your insight or for your bold faith, but blessed are you because of what God has shown you.” Blessed are you, Peter, for seeing God present with you. “You are Peter,” Jesus says, giving Simon a new name, “and on this **rock** I will build my church.”

Lest Peter become too inflated, only a few sentences later, Jesus will stub his toe on that same rock, when Peter argues with Jesus about what will happen in Jerusalem very soon. “Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus will say to him. “You are a **stumbling block** in my path.” **Peter goes from foundation, to rubble, in just a few sentences.**

“You are Petros,” Jesus says to him, making a pun in his native tongue, “and on this **petra** I will build my church.” It is the same word he uses twice, the masculine and then the feminine form of the word for **rock**, but there is a subtle difference between the two. Petros—the name Jesus gives Peter—means a stone or pebble, a small piece of larger rock, while petra means a boulder, a great big rock. So that makes Peter a chip off the old block, a piece of the rock, against which the powers of death shall not prevail.
Peter is a “rock,” because he is a chip off the Rock of Ages, and it is on this *relationship* that the church is built, not on any virtue of Peter’s—or yours, or mine.

Peter is blessed and chosen, not because he’s done everything right, or because he is better than the rest. But because *Jesus*, in his *unsearchable wisdom*, would and could use a bullheaded, stubborn, imperfect, big-hearted never-say-die, chip off the old block to build upon. **And I am really glad to hear it, because maybe you and I can be built upon too, little stones that we are.**

To Peter, and the church—to us—Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven: to bind and to loose, and all that comes to mean in our lives of faith. Jesus empowers us: to enact forgiveness; to be messengers of grace. Jesus empowers us: to proclaim good news; and ever so humbly, sometimes too, to name injustice in our world—sin—to call, especially the powers that be, into new ways of concern and care for all—into God’s ways, into kingdom ways. And even the gates of death will not prevail against God’s kingdom.

That doesn’t mean that the church always gets it “right”; just look at our sorted history. Perfection has never been our strongpoint, but GRACE is always our endpoint. God is always at work seeking to transform us, leading us to toward the will of God, renewing our minds—and all the while receiving us with Grace no matter how close or far we land from God’s dream.

I remember traveling around Italy, those years ago now, and noticing all the saints (in their Roman Catholic heritage) commemorated and honored for their work in God’s kingdom; for their efforts to live God’s dream for the world.

Everywhere we turned, there was a patron saint of this town, or that event; a basilica named in someone’s honor, or a festival commemorating them. Each celebrated, **not** for power or privilege, but humility and faithful service. I bet those “saints” would be shocked to learn there was so much to do about them. Likely they could not have imagined the impact and legacy they would leave.

Like Peter. Like us, too, little stones that we are. “YOU are a rock and with you, I am building my church,” Jesus says to US. God names us: saint, servant, rock, the body of Christ, the enactors of God’s kingdom.

Trust in the promise that YOU are a rock, a chip off the old block. God has called you; because you are reading this right now is proof enough! You are a little stone God is building on. **And blessed are you,** for all **God** will do, through you. Amen.