**Weekend of Sunday, August 27, 2023**

**13th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 21/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6**

**Second Reading: Romans 12:1-8**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20**

**Sermon Title: *“Unveiling Our Divine Purpose”***

**Theme**

*In Isaiah, the people are advised to look to their spiritual ancestors as the rock from which they were hewn. Jesus declares that the church will be built on the rock of Peter’s bold confession of faith. God’s word of reconciliation and God’s mercy are keys to the church’s mission. Paul urges us to not be conformed to this world but to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, using our individual gifts to build up the body of Christ. From the table, we go forth to offer our spiritual worship through word and deed.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6**

 1Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness,
  you that seek the Lord.
 Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
  and to the quarry from which you were dug.
 2Look to Abraham your father
  and to Sarah who bore you;
 for he was but one when I called him,
  but I blessed him and made him many.
 3For the Lord will comfort Zion;
  he will comfort all her waste places,
 and will make her wilderness like Eden,
  her desert like the garden of the Lord;
 joy and gladness will be found in her,
  thanksgiving and the voice of song.

 4Listen to me, my people,
  and give heed to me, my nation;
 for a teaching will go out from me,
  and my justice for a light to the peoples.
 5I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
  my salvation has gone out
  and my arms will rule the peoples;
 the coastlands wait for me,
  and for my arm they hope.
 6Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
  and look at the earth beneath;
 for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
  the earth will wear out like a garment,
  and those who live on it will die like gnats;
 but my salvation will be forever,
  and my deliverance will never be ended.

**Second Reading: Romans 12:1-8**

1I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
 3For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20**

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

**Sermon**

My Great-grandmother Rasener, on my mother’s side, was a German immigrant and spoke German when she didn’t want to be understood by us kids, and with a German accent when she wanted to be understood. My grandparents on my mother’s side, Grandma and Grandpa Schaefer, were second-generation German Lutheran immigrants. My mother went to the local Lutheran parochial school.

I never met my great-grandparents on my father’s side, so I don’t know much about them, but my Grandpa and Grandma Jesse attended the local United Church of Christ, a church founded by German and Hungarian Protestants who were followers of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, the primary figures of Protestantism.

Both sides of my family were strongly Christian and faithful members of their church traditions. And even today, though I am not very close to my relatives, I am certain that they are still practicing their faith in a church. And I can say that because when I look back at my heritage, the rock from which I was hewn, my people were faithful, and I can look forward to reuniting with them when all the faithful return to the Garden of Eden that Isaiah mentions.

This is something I would like all of you to think about. What is the faith heritage of your people? My guess is, most of you are like me. Your faith was passed on to you by your ancestors. There probably wasn’t an altar call or a moment you could name and claim. But more than likely, there are several people who loved you, whom you loved, respected, and trusted that had something to do with adopting their faith tradition as your own.

In the First Reading, the prophet Isaiah calls upon the people of Israel to look to their origins, to reflect upon their heritage, and to draw strength from the faithfulness of their ancestors. He reminds them that just as God called Abraham alone and blessed him, God will multiply them and bring forth their righteousness and salvation. Isaiah's words resonate with us today, urging us to reflect on our own roots, to remember the faith of those who have come before us, and to embrace our identity as children of God.

I have two sons, both of whom attend church. Not because I demanded it. That would never work. If I were to ask, I would hope they would respond by saying something about the value of a life of discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ that they witnessed through their mother and me. That isn’t an egotistical thing to say – it's our job as Christian parents – in fact, it's in the Covenant of Baptism!

As you know, I am a grandfather now. I look forward to passing on the Christian tradition to another generation. Not by pounding it into them, that kind of aggressive evangelism never works, but by loving them and earning their trust and respect so that they will see the love of Christ in me. How are you doing with your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren? I ask not to shame anyone, but rather to make you think about it.

The Second Reading from Romans provides us with practical guidance on how to live out our faith in the world. The Apostle Paul urges us to present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Is Paul calling us to throw ourselves on the altar? No! This is not a call for literal sacrifice, but rather a call to offer our whole lives, our thoughts, our words, and our actions to God. Now, I am just like you. I occasionally lost my temper with my kids. They occasionally saw me mess up. Those mistakes are also opportunities for others to see how you and I deal with issues of guilt and shame. Will they paralyze us? Or will we deal with them as opportunities to demonstrate humility, seek forgiveness, and grow more into the likeness of Christ?

And Paul reminds us that we are not alone. He reminds us that we are members of one body, each with unique gifts given by the grace of God. It is through the unity and diversity of our gifts that we can serve God's purpose and bring forth His kingdom on earth.

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus is walking along with his disciples when, out of the blue it seems, he asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, of course it was Peter, blurted out first, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." For once Peter nailed it! Jesus affirms Peter's faith and declares, "On this rock, I will build my church."

Now the one holy catholic and apostolic church has argued what Jesus meant by that ever since. The Catholics think Jesus’s comment was directed at Peter, and they interpret that to mean that Peter was appointed by Jesus to be the first pope. Protestants argue that Jesus was speaking to all the disciples about Peter’s correct statement of faith, not the person of Peter. In other words, the rock upon which Christ will build his church is the confession that he is “Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It will probably be debated till the end of the age.

This reminds me of a story I once heard. I’m told it’s a true story.

A lawyer and the pope were both killed in an accident.

The two were in line to see St. Peter at the Pearly Gates.

St. Peter asked the lawyer his name and looked it up in his book.

He then asked the Pope for his name and looked it up in his book.

"Now, if you will come with me, I will show you your eternal dwellings," said St. Peter.

They walked along the clouds and came to a huge mansion with all sorts of lavish trappings.

St. Peter turned to the lawyer and told him this was to be his house.

The Pope, knowing how important he was to the church could hardly imagine what his house would be like.

St. Peter and the Pope continued on to a small, beat-up wooden shack.

St. Peter told the Pope that this would be his dwelling.

The Pope, shocked, said to St. Peter, "Just a minute!"

That other guy was a lawyer and he got a mansion.

I was the head of the Roman Catholic Church, and this is all the reward I get?"

St. Peter looked at the Pope and said "True, you have done great things. But we have lots of Popes in Heaven, and that guy was the first lawyer ever to make it up here."

This profound exchange between Jesus and Peter reveals the true foundation of our faith—the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God, the cornerstone upon which our lives are built. It is through this foundation that the Church, the body of Christ, is established and empowered to overcome the gates of hell. And to go back to the prophecy of Isaiah, Jesus Christ is the rock from which all our ancestors were hewn, and then through them, we were hewn, and on and on.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we reflect on these passages, a common thread emerges—a call to remember our roots, to offer ourselves fully to God, and to embrace Jesus as the foundation of our faith. In doing so, we become instruments of God's love, agents of transformation, and catalysts of hope in a broken world.

In our lives, we may encounter moments of doubt, uncertainty, and even despair. The challenges we face individually and collectively can be overwhelming, and we may question our ability to make a difference. But let me assure you that God has equipped us with unique gifts and talents to bring about His kingdom. Each one of us has a role to play, and as we unite our diverse gifts, we become a powerful force for good.

Just as Isaiah encouraged the people of Israel, let us draw strength from our heritage. Let us remember the faithful men and women who came before us, those who faced trials and tribulations with unwavering faith, or whose faith may have wavered, but rescued by the LORD anyway. They passed the torch to us, and now it is our turn to carry it forward.

Let us offer ourselves fully to God, just as Paul exhorted the Romans. Our surrender to God's will opens the door to divine transformation in our lives. Our minds are renewed, our hearts are filled with compassion, and our actions are guided by love. As we offer ourselves to God, we become vessels of His grace, channels through which His light shines in the darkness.

Finally, let us declare, with the same conviction as Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is the foundation upon which our lives are built, and it is in Him that we find strength, hope, and purpose. And may we be bold enough to share that life-saving, peace bringing, message of hope to our families of course, but also to anyone willing to listen.

**Prayer**

Rock of life, we praise you for your love, grace, and mercy. Be our strong foundation and encourage us in our journey toward Christ-likeness. This we pray in the name of the one who is our example of faithfulness, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen