



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Who is he? Who are we?

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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I almost didn't go on my trip to Israel in 1999. I was going through a rather precarious time in my life and in some fearful moments, I thought that I might need the money so I almost cancelled my reservation. What a mistake that would have been. I was learning about trusting God's abundance and not making my decisions out of fear and scarcity. What I learned and discovered on that trip was worth more than 10X what it cost me. I was there in the places that Jesus walked and talked and taught and changed the world. Nothing that I had read or heard came close.

We visited Caesarea Philippi, from today's Gospel reading, which is a wonderful, very pagan place in the far northern reaches of Israel in the Golan Heights. I had my picture taken in front of the grotto shrine to the naughty little god, Pan, the satyr with his pipes who is known as the god of desolate places and various forms of debauchery. This pagan setting for Jesus' question, "Who do people say that I am?" and Peter's blurting out "You are the Christ!" is intentional in the Gospel – which was written as the church was spreading out into the pagan world. This setting contrasts Jesus and Christians with all that the world pursues. Pilgrims came to this spring looking for something in the water but we know that Jesus is the source of Living Water. Instead of a deity for desolate places, Jesus is the firstborn of all creation is the source of abundant life. I'm glad that I didn't miss Caesarea Philippi.

There is another place dedicated to this story – geographically, it is quite far away, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It is called the Church of Peter's Primacy – the honor bestowed on him in today's reading – "You are Peter, (which of course means "rock") the rock on which I will build my church. I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." I know what it is like to have someone named Peter who is a rock, solid and trustworthy – someone you could stake your life on. When the apostle Peter later denies even knowing Jesus, on that horrible night, the trust and confidence could not help but be damaged. It is not until after Jesus' resurrection, in a story in John in which Peter, while fishing, sees Jesus standing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, he throws himself in the sea, an action often attributed to his shame. But Jesus does not condemn him, instead he asks him three times, "Simon Peter, do you love me?" Every time, Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I do." And finally Jesus says "Feed my sheep." The little grey stone church on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is a memorial to the reconciliation of

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Jesus and Peter and his place of leadership in the early church. I do not know what standing by that church did for my classmates but for me it felt like being anchored in Jesus place and time. It was unimportant whether or not Peter and Jesus had ever had such a conversation because eventually Peter was a rock for the early church. Being at his little church was simultaneously exhilarating and peaceful. No description of someone else's experience could have communicated that.

Perhaps that's why Jesus so often told people not to say anything about who he was or the things that he did. Jesus is the invitation to experience the heart and mind of God personally. That invitation awaits our response. We are meant to seek and discover for ourselves. I have a handwritten note on my desk that I really like even though I don't remember what I copied it from. It says that the "purpose of religion is to be a deep inquiry about our identity and true purpose of our existence." In Christ, we meet identity and purpose face to face. In Jesus' life and teachings we are meant to learn about ourselves, if he is the image of humanity as God intends it to be, then he is also what we will find when we truly and deeply seek to understand ourselves. He is as we are meant to be. Jesus did not live for himself or even for his earthly family. He lived and died for the human family. His focus was always away from himself and his needs and directly concerned with the needs of those who suffered or did not know that they were beloveds of God.

In the story of Jesus and Peter, Peter is us. He is an ordinary guy, probably didn't even know that he was missing something in his life. One day, out of the blue, he is invited to walk along with Jesus. I'd bet that he couldn't even really explain why he dropped his life and started following Jesus down the road. Encountering the image of perfected humanity, love in human form, must have been magnetic. It drew Peter out of his ordinary life into extraordinary living. If you pull Peter's story out of the Gospels you will see that he is inconsistent, something of a doofus, he doesn't understand a lot of things that happen. He has moments of clarity. And except for Judas, no one hurt Jesus more than Peter. To go to the cross having been denied by his "rock" – it's hard to imagine that combination of pain. And yet, what did Jesus do – he loved him and gave him three opportunities to undo his betrayal. "Simon Peter, do you love me?" In the years that he had followed Jesus, Peter had heard him talk about forgiveness and love but until he experienced it for himself he didn't get it, it wasn't real. He hadn't really known who he was.

Throughout our lives we live out Peter's story. We hear the invitation, we reach for it, we kind of get it but it scares us; we fall down, sometimes we quit or put up our stubborn defenses, we have flashes of insight; we want to be worthy but sometimes show our worst. And in spite of all of those less than perfect moments, we discover that we are forgiven and loved.

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Peter learned that he was still the Rock, forgiven and loved because he was sitting there with Jesus. We do not have Jesus in the flesh sitting at our kitchen table exuding friendship and love. What we do have is two thousand years of tradition, our own worshipping community, a familiar pew to sit in, and the capacity to seek and know Divine love for ourselves. No one else can tell you what that is like, you must experience it for yourself. No one else's description will never be adequate. And the only way to find it is to look for it.

So Jesus says, over and over again, "Don't tell anyone about this." I think that he might have been saying was, "Don't tell them, invite them to come and meet me for themselves." Or, "Don't tell them, live it." "Don't tell them what love is like, love them yourselves."

Jesus' questions should always be heard within the context of what he was trying to teach us and since he was not as concerned with himself as he was with others perhaps we should hear today's question "Who do you think I am?" from another perspective. If Jesus was among us to show us what humanity was meant to be from the very beginning, then the question he is really asking is "Who do you think you are?" Do you think you are someone who can know God deeply? Do you think that you are someone capable of extraordinary self-giving love? Do you think you are someone who can live without fear or limitation? Somewhere in you is Peter the Rock blurting out the answer, "Yes, yes and yes!"

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