

On their way to a justice of the peace to get married, a couple has a fatal car accident. The couple is sitting outside heavens gate waiting on St. Peter to do the paperwork so they can enter. While waiting, they wonder if they could possibly get married in Heaven. St. Peter finally shows up and they ask him. St. Peter says, "I don't know, this is the first time anyone has ever asked. Let me go find out," and he leaves.

The couple sit for a couple of months and begin to wonder if they really should get married in Heaven, what with the eternal aspect of it all. "What if it doesn't work out?" they wonder, "Are we stuck together forever?" St. Peter returns after yet another month, looking somewhat bedraggled. "Yes," he informs the couple, "you can get married in Heaven." "Great," says the couple, "but what if things don't work out? Could we also get a divorce in Heaven?"

St. Peter, red-faced, slams his clipboard onto the ground. "What's wrong?" exclaims the frightened couple. "Geez!" St. Peter exclaims, "It took me three months to find a pastor up

here! Do you have any idea how long it's going to take for me to find a lawyer?"

We have thousands of jokes about St. Peter at the gates of heaven determining who gets in and who doesn't. There's also lots of artwork about it too. It's all based on what we have as our gospel reading for today - Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But most of this leads us astray with what is really happening in the text.

Let's start with the biggest thing - calling Peter, "Peter." Peter has become a common name in our society. But in those days there was no-one named Peter and for good reason. "Peter" wasn't a name at all. Peter is the Greek word for rock. Can you imagine the looks a young family would get in the hospital if they said they wanted to name their newborn baby boy, "Rock." Rock is not a name, just like Peter was not a name at all. It was a playful and silly nickname. Remember Jesus had nicknames for other disciples too. James and John he called the, "Sons of Thunder."

It is easy to read the Bible and take the public ministry of Jesus and his disciples all very seriously. But we forget that Jesus was an about 30 year old man and his disciples weren't all that old either. They were a bunch of young guys, and like young guys do they joked around, played pranks and had fun. That playfulness comes across in the Bible too, but the 2000 years of time difference makes us forget that. Of course there are serious things too. We have both in this passage.

A curious part of what Jesus says is another thing we easily overlook. Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Rock and on this rock I will build my church..." We think nothing of that. We forget that this is one of only two times in the Bible that records Jesus actually using the word "church." The other time is in Matthew 18:17. And church is not at all what we think of as church. When we hear the word church we immediately think of a building. And the idea that Peter would be a rock fits nicely into our idea of the cornerstone of a building. This image makes perfect sense to us. But in the Bible it does not makes perfect sense. Church is the Greek word for "called out," and in New Testament times it was used to refer to the local political assembly. And so Jesus more literally says, "You are Rock and on this rock I will build my called out."

Now we're getting a sense of the quirkiness of what Jesus says. Building something on rock suggests something stationary and static. But Jesus is building a community of the 'called out' upon Peter. He is sharing a new vision for how his followers will live.

There is rock - something solid and secure - just like the Jews believed the temple was built upon a rock that was the center of the universe. It was the rock upon which Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac. The Moslem Dome of the Rock is there now. And so there is this rock, but it is not intended for a static building. It is intended for a dynamic community.

Biblical scholars studying this passage have long debated exactly what was the rock that Jesus was referring to. Protestant scholars generally say the rock was Peter's faith. Scholars with a Roman Catholic bias often suggest the rock was the person of Peter himself; thus setting up justification for the papacy. While I believe the Catholic scholars are pretty close to right here, I still think that interpretation is a bit off the mark. The rock isn't Peter so much as it is the

revelation of God to Peter about the true identity of Jesus. Again, Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Rock and on this rock I will build my 'called out' and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

I think it is important to take the rock image all the way back to God's revelation. It is God's work and God's revelation that creates and sustains the church, not our own work. What makes us, the church, the "called out" strong? Is it our faith? No. Is it our political prowess? No. It is God's work through us that makes the church truly what it is.

This text reminds us that the church is not a human achievement. It is not a fellowship of like-minded individuals who have formed a support group. It is God's tool to work through to accomplish his mission. The church is the assembly of those called out from the world. It is inspired and empowered by God's revelation to continue his work. And it is given authority to make decisions in God's name.

Again, this is all rooted in God's work and revelation. The church can easily drift away from that, and it has done so many times, even in its earliest times. We'll see a bit about that just next week when we read about Peter's next words in the gospel reading.

Let me wrap all this up by looking at just one more line of Jesus'. He says to Rock, "... I will build my 'called out' and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Hades has a double meaning in the Bible. It is the place of the dead, and so "gates of Hades" is a biblical expression that means the same as the gates of death. The realm of the dead, which no human being can conquer, is nevertheless not stronger than the church founded on the rock of God's will and revelation. Hades can also refer to the realm of Satan and evil. Thus this text comes also as a warning that the church will come under attack, but it will never be defeated.

Notice though that the church is not portrayed a triumphant, as if by its own power it will batter down the gates of Hades. Jesus never said, "You will win." He just said, "Hades will not prevail against it." And so we don't walk

around with a smug feeling of superiority to others. We are reminded that the triumph is God's, and we participate in the struggle, knowing that God ultimately will prevail.

I suppose that leaves us with this. We do not get a pep talk saying, "You can do it!" The truth is, you can't. But God can and does. And so we engage the battle, for a battle it is, knowing that by God win cannot lose. And that the ultimate victory which we get to anticipate and celebrate is God's definite and eternal triumph over all. Amen