

15th Week after Pentecost, Proper 16 – Year A – August 27, 2008 Homily
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20
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I confess that I don't remember where I heard or read this story. It was probably one of those neat stories that circulates on email from time to time. It is the story of a woman who finds herself in heaven. But above all, it is a story of knowing who Jesus is.

The woman is called Julie, and is not old by the world's standards when she becomes seriously ill and dies. The next instant she is no longer in pain and finds herself sitting on a cushion in a large room suffused with divine light. She suddenly realizes that in her lap is a neatly folded work of tapestry. As she takes her first careful glances around the room, there are lots of people there, each with their own folded pieces of tapestry. Julie's seems to have many bright colors in it. To her right she glimpses a tapestry that is predominantly red, and to her left one with many darker colors woven in. Julie and all her heavenly companions don't have to wait long for a huge door to open, and then she sees Jesus walk into the room and approach a great throne that she has only just noticed.

Jesus welcomes everyone to heaven, and asks each person in turn to open their tapestry and hold it up for Him to see. Calling on the man way at the back of the room he unfolds the work in his hands and holds it up. It makes a stunning picture story and the man looks very pleased with himself. Julie notices that Jesus nods, and then asks the next person and the next to open the work of their hands and hold it up. Julie is marveling at the beauty before her and then quite quickly it is her turn. She eagerly pulls apart the edges of the tapestry in her lap and shakes the piece loose to hold up.

In this evening's Gospel, Jesus comes to the district of Caesarea Philippi and begins a carefully dialogued exchange with his disciples. Caesarea Philippi has a fascinating history of its own. Scriptural locations are not accidental. Whenever the location is specifically identified, it usually has some significance for the action to be revealed. Just as the location for Julie's encounter with the risen Lord is not accidentally heaven, this occasion from the Gospel of Matthew is no different. Caesarea Philippi is located on the southern slope of Mount Hermon, at one of the sources of the Jordan River – the same location where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. In ancient times, it was known as a shrine to the god Pan, but its name was changed to Caesarea Philippi after the emperor, of course, but also after Herod's son Philip who rebuilt the city. In mythology, Pan was the Greek fertility god of shepherds and flocks, and of rustic music. In extra-biblical ancient literature, this location had become known as a place of divine revelation, and is confirmed as such a place by Peter's own words about Jesus. Ancient texts like the Book of Enoch, and the Book of Levi also contain accounts of visions of God at this location. In the Celtic tradition, it would be called a "thin" place, one where the divide between earthly and spiritual realms is less well defined than in other places.

Peter receives a blessing from Jesus by correctly identifying Him as the "Messiah, the Son of the Living God." As we have seen previously in Matthew, Peter is often the named disciple who seems to represent all of the disciples of Jesus, including you and me. And so, I believe, the blessing of Peter is also a blessing on each of us as we proclaim Jesus as the Son of the living God, and our Messiah. That proclamation comes not just in telling people that we are Christians, but also in showing them through our actions as well as our words. Talk is cheap, as they say, and I was reminded again just this week how often those of us who are known as followers of Christ are watched by our friends and neighbors to see if we truly live up to that high calling.

The church in the world is comprised of all Christians. There is a lovely anonymous poem defining church in a way that is much more eloquent than anything I could say. "The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock, never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray...." In our Christianity, we may

easily skip over the reference to church in this piece from Matthew. Remember, Jesus was Jewish and attended synagogue, so the use of the word “church” seems rather incongruous in Jesus’ mouth. Matthew, who uses the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources, has added the additional sentence to Mark’s account and may well be using this phrase to make a point to his Jewish brothers and sisters who have refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. It says in Ephesians (2:20) that the church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” Being a living stone is a good analogy for Jesus’ followers. That is you and I as new living temples of the indwelling Holy Spirit with Christ as the keystone. All this is in contrast to the Temple at Jerusalem, considered the holy dwelling place of God, destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Julie has just unfolded her tapestry ready to show it to Jesus, hoping to receive the gracious nod and feel that feeling of pride in the presence of her Lord and Savior. As the edges drop and unfold, with great consternation Julie realizes that her tapestry is full of holes. In between bright threads loosely woven into a gorgeous pattern there are huge ragged holes, here and there, all over. Julie’s smile melts from her face. The strength in her arms drains away and the tapestry crumples into an untidy heap in her lap. Jesus doesn’t nod to her. He gets up from His mighty throne and walks boldly towards her. Julie cannot look at His shining face. Jesus takes Julie’s hands and folds them around the edges of her tapestry once again. The love she feels as Jesus touches her is overwhelming and like a huge shot of adrenaline. The warmth of His compassion floods over her, and Jesus, still holding her hands in His, lifts them high, so all can see her tapestry.

It is then, like the whisper of a breeze through a canopy of trees that she hears the voice in her heart and her head. It is then that she realizes that she can see Jesus with perfect clarity right through all the holes. When everyone else lifted their tapestries, their view of Jesus was blocked, until they lowered it slightly to see over it, or around it. Jesus explains to everyone that Julie’s tapestry is one of the most beautiful He has ever seen. Each hole, He tells the astonished crowd represents a time in Julie’s life when she was totally dependent on God alone, and made no work of her own hands, but simply served God’s purposes and God’s alone.

Despite the beauty and intricacy of all the tapestries in the room, it is Julie’s that Jesus picks. Her tapestry has shown all those present that she knows who Jesus is, because she is the one who has seen Jesus most clearly throughout her life. In the same way, if Peter had held up his fishing net as the story of his own life, he would have seen Jesus standing right beside him just as clearly as Julie did. Peter really sees His Saviour, our Saviour, the Saviour of the whole world, because Peter too understands his dependence on God. And I think you do too.

Amen.