

Sermon: Proper 16A

Title: Who Do You Say That I Am

Author: The Rt. Rev. Shay Craig

My dog is half Pembroke Welsh Corgi ... and half Rottweiler. So, he is the size of a corgi, you know midcalf and looks exactly like a Rottweiler.

When we adopted him, he was living in a foster home with a family that bred Great Danes. My dog could, literally, pass underneath these dogs, without them even knowing it.

The foster family, bless them, named him Shorty. Obviously.

So, when my daughter Jamie and I went to get him, we decided he needed a name with a little more power. Something that had to be said in a deep voice, to give him back some of his dignity.

What names, then, do you say with a deep voice?

Well, in Mozart's requiem mass, the basso profundo section, sings the movement in which they call out the name of God in Latin: "Rex Tremendae Majestatis" - King of Tremendous Majesty.

That's our boy, Rex.

Now when we got Rex, they told us he didn't like the ride in the car, he didn't bark, he didn't like being walked, he didn't snuggle or get on furniture, and he didn't play with toys. He was, they said, "bad at being a dog."

Over the course of the first year that we had him, Jamie and I realized that every one of these facts about Rex was wrong. In his time with us, he has spent more time than me on the couch, he barks up a storm, he LOVES riding in the truck, and he has a squirrel toy that has had its squeaker replaced more times than I can tell you.

What we call people. What we name them is important.

Today we heard Jesus give Peter a new name.

Now, Peter is my favorite disciple. Do you not have a favorite disciple? Let me recommend Peter to you then.

Peter, whose mother named him Simon, but who put his foot down and said, "Yeah, no, you guys can call me Peter." Peter to whom Jesus gives another name: Cephus: Rock.

Now, I love this nickname because I am not entirely sure that Jesus is not teasing Peter when he calls him rock. Because as the story unfolds, it becomes abundantly clear that Peter is the least rock-like person you can imagine.

When he enters the story, Peter is a fisherman in Bethsaida, an occupation that he abandons when Jesus calls him to come and follow. Possibly the people who were counting on Peter to bring in fish would not call him a rock.

Later on, when Peter is actually trying to fish, his nets keep coming up empty, until Jesus helps him out and then he brings in nets bulging with fish. Just makes me wonder how rock-solid a fisherman Peter really was.

Peter is the one who tries to walk on water, loses faith and sinks.

Peter is the one who suggests building tents at the transfiguration, which is completely the wrong idea.

Peter falls asleep while Jesus is praying at the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times.

Peter is the one who tries to talk Jesus out of dying for our sins, prompting Jesus to change his nickname to “Satan” for a second.

Peter is the one who cuts the ear off the slave when Jesus is arrested, which Jesus then has to fix.

Peter is the one who first doesn’t want to have his feet washed by Jesus and then asks to have his head and hands washed too.

And of course, Peter denied Christ three times.

Why, then, does Jesus call Peter “the rock?”

Why, in this version anyway, does Jesus say, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church.”

What does Jesus see in Peter, that we do not? He seems by all accounts to be unremarkable in every way. Exactly like the rest of us, bumbling and mis-stepping, not comprehending parables, not living up to our promises, sneaking away when Jesus is crucified. He seems like a very typical, fragile, flawed and frequently failing human person.

And yet Jesus calls him the Rock.

When Jesus speaks the blessing over him – “you are rock” - he is calling out potential that is invisible to us, but that God has placed in him. It seems to me that that is the way God works. Each of us has placed in us the potential to be children of God. Each of us has qualities, characteristics, talents, charisms that, if inspired, can make us true disciples, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, realizing the promises of the Gospel, building the foundations of the Kingdom, here and now.

And, like Peter, we may feel that we are careening through life saying the wrong thing, confused by parables and falling asleep at prayer. But clearly, being imperfect does not disqualify us from discipleship. I know of no gospel in which Jesus interacts with the perfect.

So, the good news so far is: God has placed the potential in each of us to be the rock on which the kingdom is built, even though we are not perfect. And you may not see it in yourself. Peter clearly didn't see it in himself. But God sees it. And names it.

When Jesus turns to Peter and says, you, you are a Rock, you can imagine Peter standing up a little taller. You can imagine him feeling ordained in some way for leadership. Jesus has spoken a blessing over Peter. Jesus has called out in Peter, that thumbprint of God that we all have inside of us. Jesus names it. And Peter claims it.

After Jesus has died, when there is no longer a physical presence of God in our midst, when, as now, all there is to go on is belief, then Peter begins to demonstrate the potential that Christ saw in him all along.

Peter, empowered by the Spirit, begins to be the rock. He initiates the call of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot. He preaches with great power in Jerusalem. He can heal in Jesus' name – Aeneas, Dorcas and others. God speaks to him in a vision releasing him from Jewish dietary restrictions (thank you God for that) and he begins to minister to Gentiles.

Jesus spoke the blessing over Peter and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter owns that blessing. Peter lives into the potential that God placed in him to be to the best of his personal ability, a disciple and a rock of the church.

So, we should all hope that God gives us a nickname. Preferably one that isn't also the name of a WWE wrestling celebrity. Should we all be listening for God to place a blessing on us?

Yes. And God does. Every day. Several times a week all across this diocese, I hear that exact thing. I hear people say things like, “I am not a good Christian, but so and so is, she is SO empathetic.” Or, “I am not a good person, but that guy, he is SO generous with his time.” Or, “She is so patient, and she is a good listener.”

These are blessings being spoken over us.

And these blessings come from God, through the mouths of those around us. These blessings name our virtues, our talents, our charisms. You may think there is nothing special about you. But it isn't true. God has placed potential in you – in all of us- to be disciples. And other people can see it in you and speak blessings on you.

But it is for each of us to claim it.

To say, "I am going to try to live into the passion God has placed in me." I am going to try to be the best version of me, to be the best disciples of Jesus, to be a rock on which God can build the kingdom."

It won't be easy. It won't be pretty. Look at poor Peter.

But if we believe it, if we claim it, what are the possibilities? For ourselves, for our community, for the planet? They may be big.

What about for each of us individually. What has God placed in you? What have people always said about you that you thought, "yeah that's true"? What are the blessings that you have had spoken over you and how can you live into them more completely? Dream big, God does.

What are the possibilities for us as a community? What is needed in our towns that we can provide? What ministry is lacking, what service needs to be rendered? What is the church that needs to be built in each of our contexts and how can we be the foundational rock of that church? And dream big, God does.

And what is our role in the building of this church of God in Christ? Who can YOU speak blessings over? Because we know that God speaks the world into creation... what can we speak into being by blessing.

"I know you did not mean to insult me, I know you are a kind person."

"This was a mistake, but I know you were trying and I believe you are good at this work."

"You are a brilliant and generous little boy, and I know you will grow into a man to be proud of."

What would happen if, in speaking blessings over one another, we became aware of the blessings we are to one another? What if in being rocks of the church, we established the foundations of the kingdom. Dream big, God does.

Rex, you know, when he was Shorty, lived a kind of "short end of the stick" life. But now that we call him Rex, the King of Dogs, he is fulfilling the potential that God put in him, and he is a huge HUGE blessing in our lives.

Also, in our text today, Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

Who do you say that you are? Who do you say others are? What are the blessings that we can speak today that make a brighter tomorrow for us all?

Dream big, God does.