

Isaiah 51:1-6

Matthew 16:13-20

Romans 12:1-8

“You stretch out your hand, O God,
and your strength delivers us.” AMEN!

(Sing!)

“My hands were steady

My eyes were clear and bright

My walk had purpose

My steps were quick and light

And I held firmly to what I felt was right

Like a rock

Like a rock

I was strong as I could be

Like a rock

Nothin’ ever got to me

Like a rock

I was something to see

Like a rock

Twenty years now

Where'd they go

Twenty years

I don't know

I sit and I wonder sometimes

Where they've gone"

That song, *Like a Rock* was written by Bob Seger
and he told of being inspired to write it as
he reflected on the end of a relationship
that had lasted for 11 years.

He said, it makes one wonder where all the time went
and even beyond that

it expresses growing older to be like moving
from the life of a carefree youth to maturity
where there's commitments and career
and a cruel world. (Pause)

And I'd like to lift up to you all,
the parallels of this song with the Romans
chapter 12 reading.

In your adolescent years you might have been

conformed to what Paul wrote about.

Conformed to the world and the luxuries of
what it might provide one through success.

Honestly, that sort of conforming to the world
occurred for me even through my 20's.

Those were the years when I'd departed from
the church and sought spirituality, sought God,
on my own.

There was the occasional prayer,
and a lot of using the Lord's name in vain.

There was selfishness and greed;
the pursuit of wealth and hopping from
one unacceptable thing to the next.

Almost 60 now, and the urge to conform
to the world even still presents itself, but now
I know that a transformation occurred.

A transformation that had nothing to do with my will
or my ability.

A transformation that began with connecting
to a loving church community.

It didn't happen overnight, and had nothing
to do with being a pastor.

What mattered most was connecting
with other people in loving community.

Have you noticed that the more accepting and
loving the church community is,

the better one is able to follow Jesus,
have sober judgment, and not think of
themselves more highly than we ought? (Pause)

Take this story as example...

Marcus slipped into church one Sunday morning.

His marriage had failed,
he'd started drinking again even
though he knew it would only exacerbate
his struggles.

Marcus sat in the back and was ready to leave
if anyone gave him the slightest judgmental look.

He'd had those experiences in other places.

They'd see his tattoos and judge,
they'd roll their eyes at his long hair
and judge.

He could read their thoughts as
they supposed he'd wasted his life.

But then a woman sat next to him named Diane
and she said, she was glad he was there.

The pastor said the same thing during the welcome time,
but he just thought it was a polite phrase. :-)

Nothing happened immediately, but
the acceptance Marcus found in that church
slowly convinced him that he was
not beyond the reach of Christ.

He began practicing prayer,
the listening not always talking kind.

He joined a support group and
attended a Bible Study, and
then joined the choir.

And in the practices with a group, healing continued.

Time passed and then on a rainy Sunday morning,
a young man slipped into the church
before the service began and

Marcus recognized the look,
the posture, and
the fear.

All the things Marcus did long ago.

When church ended, Marcus went over and said,
“I have sat in the chair you’re sitting in.”

And he didn’t mean he’d paid for the pew! :-)

The young man gave a guarded smile.

Marcus said, “There’s coffee in the fellowship hall.

You’re welcome to join me and you
don’t have to explain anything.” (Pause)

When acceptance was offered
to Marcus as a gift, as grace,

grace then became his practice.

Following Jesus is not only about believing
the right things or saying the right words.

It is about seeing people the way Jesus sees them
before they’re all cleaned up, before they
can repay kindness, and before anyone
knows what their future might become.

(Pause)

When Peter said to Jesus,
“You are the Messiah, the Christ.”

We might wonder what Peter had seen that

we don't know about.

There's nothing in Matthew before this text
that has been communicated or proven that
Jesus was the Messiah/Christ,

but Peter has seen something we don't know about.

Peter was still working it all out, for sure,
but God had revealed something to him, and
it led him to make a testimony.

"You are the Christ, the son of the Living God. (Pause)

And what I'd like to focus on next is what

Jesus said then to Peter,

"Blessed are you, flesh and blood has not revealed
this to you, but the Father in heaven did.

And I tell you, now, you are Peter, and on
this rock I will build my church."

We've looked at this as the formation of Peter and
his call to preside as the first pope,
the "rock" where the church is built.

Even though the New Testament
never calls him pope, tradition says he was.

Today, I'd like to wonder if Jesus meant that
Peter's testimony, or confession, is "the rock."

Could Jesus have been referring to
the "rock" of public confession or testimony
regarding who we say Jesus is?

That could be what the church is built on...(Pause)

Each one of us have a testimony
that proclaims who Jesus is.

Each of you have seen Jesus do things in your life...
you might not get it, right away, but you will.

I didn't get it right away, either.

Yet, I am sure of it now, that the witness of Jesus
in life is being worked out individually,
as well as collectively'

while we also wonder about how we, as an assembly,
say who Jesus is?

That confession, or testimony, as a church
is revealed in action and contemplation;
duty and prayer.

We need them both to be our foundation;
our rock is testimony. (Pause)

When I came here to St. Stephen,
I could feel something refreshing,
something special in this community.

You have said similar things to me and one another.

We've deepened each other's faith,
nurtured partnership, and opened
ourselves up for others.

And on this confession, the strong, vibrant, and
healthy-like-a-rock church... is built.

AMEN!