

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 16:13-20

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Now, you won't hear me admit this often, but I have some kin that lived in Texas. They weren't Texans, they just spent a few years of hard work and harder living out in those dusty plains. This is the story of my great-grandmother Pebble. By the time I knew her, she was a frail woman about the size and smell of a Marlboro. She had a Boston terrier that was both mean as a snake and dumber than a box of nails. And her house was full of old newspapers and beautiful antiques. She had an eye for beautiful things but lacked the skill to keep them that way. The Steinway was covered in rings where she'd set down glasses of lemonade or iced tea. The china cabinet was filled with wadded up paper bags she planned to use for something but never got around to. The "Chester drawers" were so crammed full of clothes that the joints gave way if you tried to pull 'em open.

A side note here. Growing up, I could've sworn that piece of furniture your clothes go in was called the Chester drawers. On the one hand, us hillbillies don't exactly enunciate. On the other, Pebble's house was the only house I'd been in that had one, and Pebble's husband, my great-grandpa, was named Chester. It did confuse me that there wasn't a set of Pebble drawers, and even more so that she seemed to use Chester's while he didn't, but if I'm honest the tire swing in the backyard was calling and that kept me from dwelling on any further inconsistencies.

We lived next door to Chester and Pebble for a while, shared a small horse pasture, a few rows of snap peas, and a chicken barn. The whole scene was quaint, and Chester and Pebble worked hard to get to quaint. They were compact people. Something about them made them seem smaller than they really were. Not exactly wiry, so much as taut. Even into his 80s, I remember Chester's forearms, muscles twisted like steel cable and hard as stone. Pebble's jaw was just as strong. A lifetime of dipping chaw and being married to Chester'd do that. They'd grown up in the hills, her in Arkansas and him in Oklahoma, if memory serves. His little legs and strong shoulders carried her away from those hills before she was 20, and they landed in West Texas, drilling for oil. Those oil fields were hard, but he made enough money to set them up for a little while, enough that they could pack up and leave that god-forsaken piece of dirt and head back to the Ozark hills.

Tell you the truth, I don't know much of what they did in their lives. I know they never stopped living hard, though for Pebble, you'd better believe that never involved even a drop of fire water passing her lips. She was a good, teetotaling Baptist, and she kept the faith. But Chester'd get into it once in awhile, and you could hear the yelling from the other side of the pasture. On one memorable occasion, Pebble got so mad at him that she ran him over with their faded pick-up truck. He sobered up pretty quick and got right to apologizing for all he'd done wrong; so she put the truck in Park, stepped out, gave him a kiss, and went inside to watch her stories. I should clarify here. Pebble's stories probably aren't what you're thinking. She had no patience for those peacocks on Days of Our Lives. Pebble loved professional wrasslin'. In fact, this is where she and I really connected. We both had a bad case of Hulkamania. The best present I ever gave anyone was to her: a picture book of Hulk Hogan with his shirt off. I just thought he looked cool. I suppose she did, too.

But she and Chester weren't the first folks to live hard and leave comfortable lives behind in search of something more. That's the whole story of the disciples, and it's just as hard, just as dusty. Simon Peter, full of faith and grit, I think he's ended up with more on his plate than he'd expected. He's lived a lifetime and a half and seen more in just a few years, and I imagine, like Chester in those oil fields or Pebble chopping wood for the stove, I imagine he's tired. And I imagine he's about ready to go back to where his blood is. And it's right about then that Jesus turns to him and says, "Peter, you've got it right. You are my rock, my cornerstone. And

on your back, I'm gonna build my church. I'll save the world, but you? You're gonna be doing some work." And before anyone has a chance to respond, Jesus tells 'em to keep quiet. I imagine Peter's about ready to grab the keys to the pickup. But that's his lot: be the Rock for God's church. Keep the faith, and the kingdom will build off your work. Love your neighbor. Honor the many members of this body. Remember Joseph and Moses and all those that came before. And keep the faith.

I don't know about you, but I kindly love it that Peter's the one that gets this honor. Because Peter has been given something beautiful, even though he doesn't have the skills to keep it that way. Give it another verse or two, and Jesus drops the infamous line "Get behind me, Satan" on that Rock. A few more chapters, and he'll play dumb while the cock crows. A few more books, and he'll argue up and down the Holy Land with other followers of Christ. And I take great comfort in that. Peter and Paul and all those folks our church is built on, they're about as real as you can hope for. Peter is Jesus's own rock, the very foundation, and that foundation's cracking as soon as it hits the ground. Paul has a way with words, but boy does he know it. They're all flawed, because they're all real. The great miracle of the church is that somehow we're still here, cracked cornerstone and all. Not even humanity can get in the way. Sometimes we even pretty the place up a bit. But sometimes we just live it. Hard as that can be, we are those rocks. And we keep on keeping the faith.

Grandma Pebble lived to be 98 years old. She was born in 1899, and one of my sisters was mad when she died because she'd had the chance to live in three centuries but fell just short. Funny what flaws we find. Now, I know she was a flawed lady. In fact, she probably woulda snapped at me just for calling her a lady. Pebble insisted on being called a gal. So, in her honor, she was a flawed gal. But that Pebble was our rock. And she was real. And best as she knew how, she kept the faith.