

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Isaiah 51:1-6 Romans 12:1-8 Matthew 16:13-20
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
August 22-23, 2017 (Traditional)

In my first congregation, in Homewood Illinois, I was heavily involved in high school youth ministry. I was there four years. There was one young man in particular named Kevin who played a big role in the youth group during my time there.

Kevin was a big guy, about 6'2" and still growing when he started his junior year. A defensive lineman. Maintained a "C" grade point average. He was a drummer for the school jazz band, and had his own rock band, too. I went to one of their concerts once. It was like listening to fingernails on a chalkboard.

After he was confirmed, Kevin cheerfully came to church every Sunday with his family. He was an active member of our active youth group. I was (obviously) happy to see him so involved. Not only for his sake—but, he also attracted other young people to the group. He was always bringing different friends of his to our activities, and a lot of them became regulars.

As time went by, I put more and more trust in Kevin. He was a natural leader. I kept the group grounded in worship, faith discussion, and prayer. Otherwise, after I gave them options, *they* decided what they were actually *going* to do. And Kevin, during his years there, became the moving force and the organizer behind their activities. This boy would plan service projects down to the smallest details. He organized ski trips for twenty people with no help from any adults. He had a gift for fundraising. He preached in church on youth Sundays. More than once, at home talking with Karen, I referred to Kevin as the Rock. He was the rock of the youth group.

But there was another side to it all. Kevin made big mistakes. Obviously, a typical high schooler...he still had a lot to learn. He barreled ahead with things way too quickly sometimes; he could be reckless and thoughtless. One of the more funny examples (it wasn't funny when it happened) was one of the annual car wash fundraiser. Kevin had planned the whole thing as a free car wash...he had recruited sponsors from the community to make a per car donation. The day turned out perfect weather-wise. The kids were expecting a huge number of customers...they were all excited.

A half hour before they opened, Kevin rigged a revolving yellow flasher light up on the street, to draw attention. But he couldn't find anyplace to plug it in. So he ended up having to pull the long extension cord through a narrow opening in one of the church basement windows, into a utility closet, where there was an outlet. To plug it in, Kevin in his excitement and hurry climbed up on some pipes in the closet. The pipe that broke under his weight was the main water line into the church. Suddenly a bunch of frightened high schoolers ran into my office talking about a flood in the Sunday School. I ran down and there was Kevin, pathetically trying to stop the water with his hands, but it was like trying to stop a fire hydrant. The parents and I could not find a shut-off valve;

the water was flowing for 10 full minutes before our custodian could get over and turn it off. So we had no water for the car wash until later that day. It was a huge success. It almost raised as much money as the church water bill that month. But, Kevin was always getting himself into these situations.

Some of his mistakes were actually more harmful, like the time he got the whole youth group in trouble by inviting them to his house while his parents were out of town. Well, word got around and it didn't stay a church youth group meeting for very long. By the time the police broke it up, there were more than a hundred high-schoolers pillaging his house. And sometimes Kevin would create hard feelings among the youth. He could have a big mouth sometimes. He had to make a lot of apologies.

But Kevin always reminded me of Peter the disciple. Jesus gave Peter his name. He called him "Rock" (That's what Peter means). It's kind of strange that Jesus would call this person "Rock," because when you read the gospels, you see that Peter is not what you would call a solid personality much of the time. He is a person of extremes. One minute he's walking on water, the next he's sinking because of his lack of faith. In today's gospel Jesus is congratulating Peter, because Peter is the first to recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, but in the very next verses, which we get next week, Jesus rebukes him and calls Peter Satan. It's because Peter refuses to accept that Jesus is going to die on a cross. Later, Peter tells Jesus that he'd die for him. But within a few hours, Peter denies even knowing who Jesus is.

So: If you were starting a business, for example, is this the kind of "Rock" on whom you're going to build your future? Are you going to stake your money and your future fortunes on a person like Peter? Someone who professes complete loyalty to you one minute, and who is nowhere to be found when you get into trouble?

God does it. His Kingdom on earth is built on people like Peter. He continues to build his Kingdom on people like Kevin...on people like you and me. Very few of us, I'll bet, look in the mirror and call ourselves rocks. Because we know all the mistakes we have made. We're not committed enough; sometimes we lack courage to witness; sometimes we are tempted to neglect worship; sometimes we neglect God's word. And yet God looks at you and me, and says "You are the Rock on which I am going to build my kingdom in this world." Many of you parents, I know, can remember the day you handed the car keys to your 16-year old for the first time. Remember that feeling? I wonder how God feels when he hands us the keys to the kingdom and tells us we are going to be his representatives in this world. But that's exactly what he does. God puts his faith in us.

Let me tell you more about Kevin. On the day I left that congregation, I finally told him how I thought of him as the Rock of the youth group. He looked confused, because I think he was remembering the broken pipe, the thoughtless things he said, the public disgrace of the party. I've told you how he was a good organizer, a natural leader, a loyal attendee. But that's not why I called him the Rock. I was remembering all those times he had immediately apologized to those youths whom he had hurt with his careless comments, and how he brought the group closer together than ever by doing it. I

remembered him taking full responsibility for every mistake he'd made, for not running away from his parents or me, or the other kids' parents, after the party. I remembered the way he never made excuses for himself, the way he refused to put blame on others. All of those times—God's kingdom showed itself in Kevin. Kevin was a rock, because he knew about forgiveness. He lived by God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and I know that, because he openly told us so, and openly showed us what forgiveness looked like. He made big mistakes, but he was a rock because he was building his life on the Rock. And he lived with complete boldness, like you and I should, because in the light of Jesus' forgiveness for him, he wasn't afraid of any cross.

There's no doubt: like the apostle Peter, we tear God's heart out by what we do and say. We run away from the cross. We put blame on others when it's clear we should just be changing the way we live. We choose to hold grudges when we should be making apologies. We live in fear, even when God has told us: here, I'm giving you the keys to the kingdom.

But let's remember; on the cross, God is basically telling us: "Here, don't just take little pieces of my heart anymore. *Take it all.*" Let's take it all. With Peter, let's face our guilt and mistakes and unfaithfulness, and come and take everything God has to give us. The cross, where Jesus gave his life for us, is where God puts our shame to death and gives us a new life in return. This is forgiveness. Complete forgiveness. This is where God creates rocks.