August 23, 2026 prpr 16 This Sermon Rocks

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua

Are you the type of person who picks up small rocks, pebbles or stones you notice? I am. Especially when walking on a beach. It can be frustrating for anyone walking with me because I often stop to pick up a small stone that catches my attention. I've been this way all my life, even as a child I was fascinated with some of the rocks and stones along roadsides or stuck in paving material. And why not – rocks can be fascinating with all their different colors, textures, sizes and shapes. Each stone, pebble, and rock has a story to tell, its own autobiography of what kind of rock it is, where it came from, where it has been, and how it got where it is. There are sciences that study the language of rocks, because knowing and understanding their stories can help us understand the land we live on, where ground water may be closer to the surface or farther from it, even how suitable a place is for building a road, house, hospital, school or town

As I am sure many of you already know, the stones and pebbles we pick up on walks are smaller pieces of larger rocks that broke off and have slowly moved away from that larger parent rock. These smaller pieces have been made smooth or sharp by friction that moves them along whether that movement is caused by water, ice, the earth, or being pushed or dropped by birds, people or animals. While we often think of rocks and stones as unchanging, each tells a story of how it has changed its size, shape, and place over a very long time, while staying the same substance as the rock it came from.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he gave Peter a new name in today's Gospel. It also happens to be the same thing the prophet Isaiah was referring to in the first lesson we read this morning.

In today's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples had gotten out of town and traveled to a region that was quiet, where they could take a rest from all the busy work of Jesus' ministry healing, feeding thousands, teaching crowds, and talking with religious leaders.

In this quiet place, Jesus and the disciples didn't just sit around sipping their morning coffee and listen to the birds or watch the clouds, although they may have done some of that. Jesus brought them away from the busyness and the crowds so he could give them an opportunity to reflect on what they had experienced by asking them two questions: who do people say he is and who do they say he is. It's perhaps wise Jesus started with the easier question of what others say. Because that could help ease them into the practice of reflection. The question of who they thought he is must have been harder because only Peter spoke up.

Jesus seemed so happy with Peter's response that Jesus changed his name from Simon to Peter. Name changes happen fairly often in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. And when they happen, we need to pay attention because names in the Bible help describe a person's character and role in God's story. Such as when God changed both Abram and Sarai's names, which mean "exulted father" and "my princess" respectively to Abraham which means "father of many nations" and Sarah which means "mother of nations". This name change signified the promise God made to both Abraham and Sarah that together they would parent many generations, and as anyone who attended last Sunday's adult forum learned, three major religions are rooted in Abraham and Sarah. That God included Sarah is very important, because it indicates she is an equal participant in the promise. Likewise, Jacob, whose name means "supplanter", which was appropriate because he stole the blessing and birthright from his brother Esau, was given a new name after a wrestling match with a mysterious figure. His new name was Israel which means "wrestles with God" to signify his relationship with God had changed along with his relationship with his brother.

So, when Jesus gave Peter a new name in today's Gospel, it means more than an affectionate nickname or inside joke. Changing Peter's name refers to the very thing Isaiah mentioned in the first reading: looking at the rock from which he was hewn. Peter didn't give the academically or intellectually

correct answer that Jesus was the Messiah. His answer indicated a connection to God through Jesus. The Messiah was not another politician, dissatisfied citizen, rebel rouser, or touchstone to the past. The Messiah is a biblical phrase for a person who has a unique relationship with God. That is why Jesus said God revealed this to Peter and that connection and relationship is why Peter got a new name.

This is evident in the Biblical Greek the Gospel was first written in. In Greek, Peter is *Petros*, which translates "pebble" or "small piece". The word used for rock is *petra*, it means "boulder", or "great big rock" and it is that big rock the gates of Hades can't prevail against. In other words, Peter is a chip of the old block.

While today's Gospel is often interpreted that Peter and his role in the church is impervious solid stone, that may not have been Jesus' intention. Peter is not the great big rock; he is a piece of it. Like those little pebbles or stones any of us might notice while walking in the woods, along a beach, or even on a road here in the Northwoods. Which means we could think of the church as made up of many of these pebbles, each a chip of the old block, each a bit of connection to and relationships with God's love incarnate in Jesus. Like each pebble has a story that connects it back to the larger rock from which it came, each of us has a story connecting us to God, from which we came. Together, these stories, these connections to God through Jesus are what makes the church.

Sometimes we can forget that. It's easy to do. Peter often forgot, as anyone familiar with the Gospels knows. We can get wrapped up in histories, programs and activities. There is nothing wrong with those things in and of themselves. They have value and purpose. It's when the church forgets it's connection to God, forgets each person, each stone is a piece of that connection whose story is not over, that it can cause harm, care more about money than people, treat each other carelessly or cruelly, give into fear, or cling to the way things have always been out of a desire for false comfort over processing grief or change through that connection with God. Perhaps that is why today's Gospel doesn't begin with Peter's name change, it begins with Jesus taking his disciples out of busyness to a quiet place to practice reflection, by asking them who he is so that they can reflect on that connection, that they are – as all of us who follow Jesus are – chips of the old block. And by reflecting, renew that connection.

The next time you notice a stone, maybe because something in it catches the light with a sparkle, is a beautiful color, or is just different, I hope you consider it an invitation to pause and reflect, as Jesus did with his disciples, on your connection with God, and how God might be inviting you to grow deeper into that shared connection, because God loves you, which means God loves the church, and is with you always, through loss, through fear, through joy and celebration, and every kind of change in every age.