

The Rock of Church

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(Welcome Sunday)

The word, *Church*, was barely in Jesus' vocabulary – today's use was the first, and he said it only after Peter declared Jesus be Messiah. Jesus was not a fortune teller. He did not have a glass ball to peer into the future. I sincerely doubt Jesus used the word, "church," anticipating centuries of popes to come.

The name, Peter, or ***Petra, means Rock***, and Jesus' statement was a simple play on words. You are Rock, and on *this Rock, I will build my church* – But that rock isn't necessarily Peter. Of-course I have no way of knowing what Jesus meant – none of us does – But thinking about church and rock and truth and Welcome Sunday, I have to ask, *What it is we do, here, anyway? What do we do? Who are we?*

When I first heard that Robin Williams had died – here, in our own little hamlet, I was, like you, sad. I was sad about the disease of depression, and how many lives it claims. And later, when I heard that Williams' may have killed himself because he was afraid of his own Parkinson's Disease – I was sad at that, too. Sad, of course, at the loss of **both** genius and a person who oddly enough – most of us felt to be a friend – he had that way about him - But I was also sad because here we are – a church in his community – maybe even *his* church – Didn't someone tell me his mother worshipped at St. Stephen's? And yet he didn't, as far as I know, come here for help. Or to pray. For care.

After Robin Williams died, a St. Stephen's parishioner asked me about suicide – She had heard Christians claiming that a person who commits suicide goes to hell. That *is* Roman Catholic doctrine, that suicide is a mortal sin. *Is it true?* She asked. I answered unequivocally, No. I mean yes – that is Catholic doctrine, but it is not the rock on which Jesus' built the church, that much I can tell you.

Suicide *may* be a bad choice – a desperate choice – an anguished cry – but it is not a mortal sin. I once pastored a woman who committed suicide in her eighties – She had battled severe depression for decades, and now all she wanted was to be freed from the pain. She consulted her doctor, her adult children, and me. And over the course of that tri-partite consult, she decided to starve herself. Under her doctor's supervision, she stopped eating and drinking, and eventually she died. Although she backslid, sort of – A couple of times she insisted on her 5 o'clock cocktail, and one hot Sunday afternoon, she called her daughter for an ice cream Sunday. This woman's death was about mercy, not *condemnation*. And in light of this, and of Robin Williams' choice, - And of Jesus' claim about rock and the church, I still want to know, *what is the rock of church?*

What does it mean for you to drive around town with license plate holders that invite others, *-You are welcome at St. Stephen's?* Many of you have seen the mock license plate holder Bruno Tapolsky had made for me – *St. Stephen's: Join us or go to hell*. Some

churches think that way. We don't. In the Episcopal Church and here, at St. Stephen's, we think in terms of a radical welcome. That we are the Statue of Liberty of Churches – *give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses ...*

Welcome Sunday must mean something *radical*, if it means anything at all. Week before last, I attended our own bishop's roundtable discussion about Socially Responsible Investing. Some people in our diocese want us to divest endowment money from investment in oil companies – to protest climate change. After a few presentations, we broke into small groups to share thoughts. In my group, one guy said he had spoken to young adults last year - and they told him that they could not remain in the Episcopal Church if we don't divest – if we don't stand-up to the oil companies. This fellow concluded rather dramatically, - *If the church doesn't divest from oil companies, we're going to lose all of our young adults. And the church will die! Really?* So when Jesus - talked about *church*, he meant it must be a politically correct institution? *If that is the case, I'm in big trouble!* Yes – my faith informs my politics – but I sincerely believe that 2000 years of church history mean we are more than just a club of political correctness. And I believe young adults will continue to be interested in church for the same reason middle aged and older adults are interested – You see: being Church means ***nothing if it*** does not first mean Faith. God. Church is where you as a human being can *become* most human – embodying both hope and fear, both dream and disillusionment. Church allows you to bring your anger and hate with impunity, so they can be transformed into peace and forgiveness. Church affords you the luxury of self-examination – following which, you discover the path to amendment of life – you make amends with others, and amends with God. Being Church promises healing amidst sickness, and miracles amidst storms. And most of all, being Church lets you somehow touch eternity itself: God.

On this Rock – I will build my church, and I sincerely doubt Jesus meant he was going to build the church on Peter. Peter had claimed Jesus to be Messiah, *You are the Christ*, - ***That*** is the rock – the truth of Messiahship, not the person of Peter. Which means one thing, and just one thing: God has not – and will not – leave you alone. And *that* is why I would have liked Robin Williams to come by here – so he could hear that he was not alone – whether he lived or died – he was not and still is not – alone. As our funeral liturgy proclaims, - *Whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord's possession.*

On this Rock – I will build my church.