

Proper 16 (August 24, 2014)

“Built on the Rock” (*Lutheran Service Book*, # 645)

*Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry  
from which you were dug. (Isaiah 51: 2)*

*So we, who are many, are one body in Christ (Romans 12:5)*

*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. (Matthew 16:18)*

Those of us who live in communities where many of the church buildings are at or beyond the century mark, have dealt with the reality of the phrase “even when steeples are falling.” This hymn, however, begins with the image of a rock, which, unlike human masonry, will not weaken or fall. This rock is the very foundation of our faithful journey with God through our lives and into eternity. In the lesson, Jesus is inviting or perhaps even commanding Peter to be like Him—the very rock upon which the church is built and around which it gathered.

“Built on the Rock” is one of the recognizable and beloved of the Lutheran Scandinavian hymns. I first remember singing this hymn as a child at the dedication of a new church building. But of course, the Church is not just a building made of perishable materials. It is made up of the people of God. “We are God’s house of living stones” and individually the temple in which God dwells. We become God’s children through baptism, the sacrament in which God calls us to be his own. We are nourished at the altar where we remember Christ’s sacrifice. And we are fed by the Word, the living and incarnate Word, “Christ yesterday, today, the same, and evermore, our Redeemer.”

One more image remains in Nikolai Grundtvig’s hymn:

“Bells still are chiming and calling,  
Calling the young and old to rest,  
But above all the souls distressed,  
Longing for rest everlasting.”

Most congregations have bells of some sort, or wish that they had them. But what is it that bells do? The answer may lie in what is now a fairly well-known case of a Danish church

bell that was rung in West Denmark Lutheran Church, Luck, Wisconsin, from 1937 until it was destroyed in a fire in 1985.

To the bath and the table,  
To the prayers and the word,  
I call every seeking soul.<sup>1</sup>

Bells wake us, summon us, and gather us to a place of unity. And so we sing—with Grundtvig, with the bell from Wisconsin, and with all Christians in every time and place.

In those faith communities where there has been struggle—a fallen steeple, strained relationships that seem beyond repair, the sudden death of a vibrant leader, an uncertainty in how best to reach out to the community—we take heart in knowing that Christ indeed is the Rock. No matter our struggles, God is mightily at work to guide and protect us, and to bless us so that we may see his face and rest in peace.

“I know My own; My own know Me.  
You, not the world, My face shall see.  
My peace I leave with you. Amen.”

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 89. (also in Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to ELW*, 501)

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Built on the Rock the Church shall stand  
Even when steeples are falling.  
Crumbled have spires in ev'ry land;  
Bells still are chiming and calling,  
Calling the young and old to rest,  
But above all the souls distressed,  
Longing for rest everlasting.

Surely in temples made with hands  
God, the Most High, is not dwelling;

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High above earth His temple stands,  
    All earthly temples excelling.  
Yet He who dwells in heav'n above  
Chooses to live with us in love,  
Making our bodies His temple.

We are God's house of living stones,  
Built for His own habitation.  
He through baptismal grace us own  
Heirs of His wondrous salvation.  
Were we but two His name to tell,  
Yet He would deign with us to dwell  
With all His grace and His favor.

Here stands the font before our eyes,  
Telling how God has received us.  
The altar recalls Christ's sacrifice  
And what His Supper here gives us.  
Here sound the Scriptures that proclaim  
Christ yesterday, today, the same,  
And evermore, our Redeemer.

Grant, then, O God, Your will be done,  
That, when the church bells are ringing,  
Many in saving faith may come  
Where Christ His message is bringing:  
"I know My own; My own know Me.  
You, not the world, My face shall see.  
My peace I leave with you. Amen."

Text: Nikolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig, 1783–1872, abr.; tr. Carl Döving, 1867–1937, alt.  
Text: Public domain

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music, Concordia University Chicago.  
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