

Sunday, September 3, 2017
13th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17
Romans 12.9-21; Matthew 16.21-28
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Poor Peter! How the mighty have fallen! One minute Jesus is telling him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! . . . And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16.17-18). Where he is being praised for having great insight in answering Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am,” to which Peter correctly responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16.16). Praised to the point of being given an exalted position in God’s Kingdom, of being the one who will, because of his great faith and insight, be the foundation of the Church and a model for all who follow Jesus. And the next minute, Jesus is telling Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mt 16.23a).

I feel bad for Peter. If he’s anything like me, he must be feeling pretty rotten. I know from personal experience that when I have messed up and been called on it by the boss, I always felt bad. Doubly, triply so when I had earlier done something for which the boss has praised me, only to mess up. The fall is even greater. The sense of having disappointed the boss compounds the sense of disappointment in myself. And, as I imagined it, compounded the disappointment in my boss’ eyes.

So what happened? Why the drastic change in Jesus’ assessment of Peter? In Peter’s standing among not only the Twelve, but all of Jesus’ followers?

As we saw last week, Peter’s famous confession that Jesus is the Messiah marked a significant turning point in Jesus’ life and ministry. At this point, he has set his face toward Jerusalem. In response to Peter’s confession, Jesus begins to teach his disciples the true meaning of his Messiahship. “That he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Mt 16.22). And this is when everything changes.

In response, Peter takes Jesus aside and lays into him. He rebukes Jesus, saying “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” (Mt 16.22). It’s one thing to have issues with what Jesus has said. It’s quite another to rebuke him. Particularly in a public, even a quasi-public, manner. So why did Peter dare do such a thing?

Certainly the basis for Peter’s actions, or at least the motivation, was his misunderstanding of the role of Messiah. Not just his misunderstanding, but really everyone’s. The prevailing notion among the Jewish people was that the Messiah would be a great militaristic and nationalistic hero in the model of King David. One who would be victorious over the Roman oppressors, thereby liberating the people. In a general sense, the Messiah was associated with victory and glory. But the model of Messiah that Jesus laid out was the exact opposite. The Messiah, according to Jesus, would experience suffering and death. The disciples would have had a hard time accepting what Jesus had just told them. Not only because it went against what they had always believed about the Messiah, but also because it would have been a personal blow to

them. Certainly there was the realization of the personal loss they would experience at losing Jesus. But there was also another loss. As those closest to the Messiah, the disciples would have shared in his victory and glory, in his eminence. But now Jesus is telling them that is not to be the case. No victory or glory for him – not in the expected sense. And no victory or glory for them – not in the expected sense. In rebuking Jesus, Peter was merely voicing the shock and disappointment that the rest of the disciples were equally feeling.

The reason for Peter's boldness was also probably motivated by the recently conferred status he received from Jesus. Maybe having been blessed and praised by Jesus, and having been made the foundation on which the Church would be built, went to Peter's head. Maybe he was taking his newly appointed position a little too seriously. Maybe he was overstepping his bounds, thinking in his new position he had a right to question, even rebuke, Jesus. Or as my mother would say, maybe "he's gotten a little too big for his britches."

These two things combined – the dashed expectation and his new position – could have led Peter to go toe-to-toe with Jesus. In an attempt to seek to shape Jesus in his own image. To get Jesus to live up to Peter's expectations of who he should be. About what kind of Messiah he should be.

To which Jesus fires back with the harshest words ever directed toward one of his disciples: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mt 16.23). Now, to be honest, Jesus' response seems a little harsh. Okay, so Peter was disagreeing with Jesus. But was it really necessary to call him Satan, the personification of evil? Was Peter disagreeing really an act of evil?

To be clear, Jesus did not think Peter was evil. While by this time in the development of religious thought Satan had indeed become recognized as a supernatural being who personified evil and who tempted people to behave immorally, that was not really the image Jesus was seeking to convey. The clue to this is in his statement that Peter was a stumbling block. That his mind was on human goals as opposed to divine goals. What Jesus was actually evoking was the image of Satan – or Ha-Satan – as presented in the Book of Job. Ha-Satan being not a particular individual, but a title. Of one who is not so much evil as one who is an accuser, an adversary. For in the moment, that is what Peter was doing. In contradicting Jesus, he was essentially accusing Jesus of blasphemy against Peter's own view of the Messiah. He was an adversary in that he was seeking to turn Jesus away from the path he was embarking on.

Jesus further explains himself when he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Mt 16.24-25). When Jesus has described his destiny, he was also describing the destiny of those who truly follow him. What Peter failed to realize was that in his revelation to the disciples, Jesus is not only teaching the meaning of Messiahship. He is also teaching the true meaning of discipleship – of what it means to be his followers.

In saying "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus was certainly condemning Peter's rebuke, condemning Peter's mistaken understanding of Messiahship, and by extension his mistaken understanding

of discipleship. But in telling Peter to get behind him, he was not casting him out. Rather, this was Jesus' way of telling Peter that he needed to get out of Jesus' way. Instead of standing in front of him, physically and metaphorically preventing Jesus from doing what he needed to do, Peter needed to get behind Jesus. To support him in his actions. To follow where Jesus would lead. Jesus is instructing Peter to reshape his approach and perspective to be in alignment with God's plan for salvation. Only by doing that, only by denying himself, by denying his own preconceived notions of who Jesus should be, of who he wanted Jesus to be, would Peter be able to live into the true meaning of discipleship. And only then would Peter be able to live into the blessedness that Jesus had earlier conferred upon Peter as the one who would be the foundation on which the Church would be built.

As the foundation for the Church, Peter is, in many ways, a model for us. While we build our faith and rest our belief on that foundation, we, at times, are subject to the same struggles as Peter. How often do we seek to cast Jesus in our own image? To set our minds "not on divine things, but on human things?"

We have been given the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Mt 7.12a). And we have been given the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22.37, 39). These are our guides as to how we get behind Jesus. As to how we take up our own crosses and follow him. Paul reinforces these rules for true discipleship in today's Epistle reading. He presents a series of statements, the marks of a true Christian, drawing from the ancient Jewish wisdom tradition. All of these focus on social relations, beginning with "love one another with mutual affection." All the rest of his statements flow from this. Are merely fine points of this.

It's hard to live according to these rules. There's no denying it. Often times, our own egos and selfishness get in the way. We would rather have faith in ourselves. We would rather work for our own vision of the future. But Jesus is emphatic. To be his followers, we must deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him. This means that something inside us must die. Our egotism and selfishness must die. Our faith in ourselves as the source of our salvation has to die. To be replaced with a focus on the One we follow as the source of our life, our strength, and our salvation. Jesus demonstrated this by taking up his own cross – the cross of his crucifixion – and dying for our sake. In the ultimate act of love.

The good news is that what happened on the cross demonstrates God's unbounded mercy, forgiveness, and love, for each and every one of us. Because of that love and mercy, when Peter himself faltered, going from blessed rock to stumbling block, from foundation of the Church to Ha-Satan, God's love and mercy prevailed. He had the opportunity to fall in behind Jesus and continue on the right path. The path that led him back to blessedness.

As the foundation on which the Church is built, Peter is a model for us. When we seek to cast Jesus in our own image, when we seek to follow our own way as opposed to the way of discipleship, God's love and mercy prevail. Jesus is always there, ready to lead us back to the right path. Gently guiding us with the words "Get behind me."