

From Solid Rock to Stumbling Block
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 14A
Matthew 16:21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "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" (Matthew 16:21-23, NRSV).

The church I served in North Carolina was right on the edge of a college campus and for nearly seven years, in addition to my work as pastor, I set out each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning to walk across the quad, climb the front steps of the Burriss building, enter a classroom on the second floor, and try to teach religion to college freshmen. Try, I say. I'm not sure how much they learned, but I learned plenty, and one of the things I learned is that when you are teaching religion to freshmen, even at a Baptist college, you can't take anything for granted. You can't assume that they know when the Babylonian exile occurred, or that they understand the interdependence of the synoptic gospels, or that they can explain the hypostatic union of the Trinity. You just can't. I remember standing in front of the class a few weeks into my first semester and saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen, this is a Bible. The first two thirds of it, more or less, is the Old Testament and the remaining third is the New Testament. Got it?"

We were studying the New Testament that semester and specifically the first four books of the New Testament—the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We had been talking about major and minor characters and their relationship to Jesus. At one point I drew a circle on the board and wrote Jesus’ name at the center of it. “Now,” I said, “based on your understanding of these characters, who is inside that circle with Jesus?” And they began to offer up some guesses. “John the Baptist?” “Jesus’ mother, Mary?” “The disciples?” I wrote those names inside the circle and then said, “OK, and who would be outside the circle?” And they said, “Pontius Pilate.” “The Scribes and Pharisees.” “The Devil.” I wrote those names on the board, outside the circle, with the devil’s name way, way outside the circle. And then I asked this question: “What’s the difference? What puts some of these characters inside the circle, where Jesus is, and others outside the circle where he is not?” And they shrugged their shoulders as if they didn’t know, but I think if Peter had been in my class, he would have raised his hand.

That’s the thing about Peter: he was always raising his hand. When Jesus asked, “Who wants to be my disciple?” There was Peter [hand up]. When Jesus asked, “Who wants to walk on water?” There was Peter [hand up, waving]. When Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” There was Peter [hand up, waving crazily]. “Oh, oh! I know! You are the Christ!” he said. “The son of the living God!” And Jesus gave him the look that every teacher’s pet lives for: “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, ‘the Rock,’ and on this rock I will build my church, and the

gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." It was Peter's proudest moment. He was right there at the center of the circle, standing beside Jesus. But six verses later he is as far away from the circle as anyone can be. "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus says, and you have to wonder: What happened?

The answer is in our Gospel reading for today. Matthew tells us that "from that moment on"—from the moment Jesus blessed Peter and told him he was the solid rock on which the church would be built— "he began to tell his disciples 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." It probably didn't make sense to any of them, but especially not to Peter, who had just told Jesus he was the Christ, the son of the living God. The word *Christ*, of course, is the Greek equivalent of *Messiah*, a Hebrew word that means, literally, "the anointed one." Do you remember when Samuel anointed David as king over Israel by pouring oil on his head? In that moment David became an anointed one, a messiah, a christ with a small "c", and ever since the time of David Israel had been waiting for one of his ancestors to sit on his throne, to save them from their enemies, to make Israel great again. Peter thought Jesus was that person. "You are the Christ," he said, and then he went one better, "You are the Son of the living God!"

Instead of brushing the compliment aside (as we so often do), instead of saying, "Oh, thank you Peter. That's very flattering," Jesus says,

“Yes. That’s it. You got it, Peter! Now, let me tell you what it means to be God’s one and only anointed one. It means going to Jerusalem where I will suffer and die.” And the disciples are shocked. It is so completely opposite of anything they have ever heard about the Messiah that they stop in their tracks and stare. The Messiah wasn’t supposed to suffer and die; he was supposed to conquer and rule! He was supposed to run the Romans out of Israel, climb the throne of his ancestor David, bring Israel into a whole new era of peace and prosperity. I’m not surprised that Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord. This shall never happen to you!” But that’s when Jesus whirls around and says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. For you are not setting your mind on divine things but on human things.” And there it is: the answer. What flung Peter from the inner circle to the farthest extreme was his thinking. He wasn’t thinking the things of God; he was thinking the things of men. And for a week now I’ve been trying to think what the difference is.

It seems to come down to this: that while our thoughts are frequently *self-centered* God’s thoughts are always *other-centered*, and while our ways are often *self-serving* God’s ways are always *self-giving*. In other words, it is God’s nature to give himself away for the sake of others, and our way to save ourselves at any cost, which means that Isaiah was right about us: God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways (Isa. 55:8). But they are the thoughts and ways of Jesus. When Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Jesus begins to explain what that means. To be the Son of God is to share God’s nature. It is to give yourself away for the sake of others. But when Jesus begins to

describe how that will happen—through his suffering and death in Jerusalem—Peter shudders and says, “God forbid it, Lord. This shall never happen to you!”

Peter said it partly, I think, because he was Jesus’ right-hand man, and if Jesus were crowned King over Israel there would certainly be a place for Peter in his cabinet. But he said it mostly, I think, because he was a human being, and, like the rest of us, he was programmed for self-preservation. When Jesus said he was going to be arrested, tried, and crucified Peter swore that he would die with him. But when a servant girl asked him later if he was one of Jesus’ disciples, he swore that he wasn’t. Why did he do it? Because he was afraid. He was afraid that what was happening to Jesus would happen to him, too, and that if he admitted he was one of Jesus’ disciples he would end up on a cross right beside him. It isn’t in our nature to give ourselves away for the sake of others. It is in our nature to protect ourselves, to preserve our lives. Once again Peter was thinking the things of men and the result was that instead of standing with Jesus in the hour of his greatest need Peter ran from the courtyard weeping, as far from the center of the circle as he had ever been.

I think this is why Jesus says on the road near Caesarea Philippi, “If anyone wants to be my disciple let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” In other words, “If you want to come join me at the center of this circle you have to stop thinking the things of men and start thinking the things of God. You have to stop wondering how you can protect yourself and preserve your life. You have to start thinking, instead, how you can give yourself away for God’s sake, and for the sake of others.” And this is

where I think the genius of Jesus' teaching becomes apparent. If what keeps us from thinking the things of God is our fear of death then let's face that fear head on. Let's pick up a cross. Let's volunteer to die. And then let's follow Jesus to Jerusalem and dare anybody to stop us. Because here's the truth: if you give your life away then nobody can take it from you. Jesus knew that. That's what he was thinking. And when Peter tried to get him to think differently, he said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. I am on my way to Jerusalem and no one, not even you, is going to stop me."

This is radical thinking, and I have to say: it isn't very popular. You can find preachers who will tell you how to have "your best life now." You can find preachers who will give you "eight steps to create the life you want." You can find preachers who will tell you how to live a "life without limits." And, as you might imagine, those preachers are enormously popular. People pack stadiums to hear that kind of message. But then along comes Jesus saying, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it," and that's when the stadiums begin to empty out. It's not a very popular message, but maybe it's only because so few people have ever really tried it. I wonder how my life would be different, how your life would be different, if we decided today that we were going to stop thinking the things of men and start thinking the things of God? If we decided, in other words, that we were going to start giving ourselves away for God's sake, and for the sake of others?

If Peter were here, he would raise his hand. “I can tell you the answer to that question,” he would say, “because I’ve done it both ways. I’ve thought the thoughts of men. I’ve tried to save my own life. I’ve trembled at the fear of death. But something happened to me on that first Easter. When I saw the risen Lord, I realized that death had been defeated. I didn’t have to be afraid of it anymore. If God could raise Jesus, he could raise me, too. And so, on the Day of Pentecost, I stood before a crowd in Jerusalem and told them that they were the ones who had killed the Son of God. I could hardly believe I said it. They might have taken offense. They might have killed me, too. But for whatever reason I didn’t care anymore. I almost dared them to do it. And for the first time in my life, I had the courage to say everything on my mind, and believe me there was plenty! I told those people all about Jesus. I told them what they had done to him was wrong. I told them they needed to do something to set things right. I told them they needed to repent and be baptized. And you know what it was like? It was like I was a different person, like that old, fearful, Peter—the one who denied Jesus—was dead and gone, like a caterpillar had crawled into a cocoon and a butterfly had come out, like I had lost my old life but found a new one to put in its place. It was the most incredible thing in the world—I felt like I could fly! —and that’s when I remembered what Jesus said on the road near Caesarea Philippi: ‘Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’”

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