

"Poor Peter"

Mathew 16: 21-28

September 3, 2017

Put yourself in Peter's place. Poor Peter. In last Sunday's gospel, it was Peter who responded to the most important question in all of the scriptures! Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?" And, after only a moment's hesitation, Peter answered, with conviction, "**You are the Christ!**"

And Jesus said: "Yes! Blessed are you, my friend and you will be the rock on which my church will be built!" Can you imagine! Peter must have felt wonderful, fantastic! It must have been the greatest moment of his life! He must have beamed like a schoolboy who got the biggest question of all...exactly right!

But, then, just a few verses later, comes the *worst moment of Peter's life*. Jesus is telling the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and there he would suffer and die. And Peter, poor Peter, who loves this man so much, says, out of the deepest compassion and concern, "God forbid that this should happen! I don't want you to suffer and die!"

And, Jesus...just...takes...Peter...apart! Calls him Satan! Calls him a Stumbling Block! Says, "Get away from me!" Jesus is absolutely brutal with this poor man who only wanted to protect his friend. In a couple of verses, Peter's finest hour turns into the worst moment of his life. In just a couple of verses, he goes...

- from being called blessed to being called Satan;
- from church-rock to stumbling-block;
- from friend to foe;
- from confession to confusion.

"Get away from me, you Devil," Jesus says to him!

If you ever had the notion that Jesus was all smiles and sweetness, here is one disciple who would tell you otherwise. Peter must have been absolutely *devastated!* And how *confused* he must have been, too, at this totally unexpected response, especially from the One *for whom he would have died!* *Devastated* to hear such a rebuke made so bitter because it came from Jesus of all people.

And, we might also be surprised at such invective, such a verbal back-of-the-hand as poor Peter got. Doesn't that seem a little out of character for the Good Shepherd? Especially in view of the fact that Peter said what he did! Of course, he didn't want Jesus to suffer and die because he loved him! And, he didn't understand **why** Jesus had to suffer and die. One might think that Jesus could have gone a little easier on his devoted friend.

But, no, Jesus responded like he did, because... (*and by the way, if someone asks you what this sermon was about, don't say, "Well, you know, it was about Jesus or something." This is not the children's sermon. Right here is what the sermon is about...does everyone have pencils available in your pew?*)

Jesus responded like he did, because...Peter, albeit without realizing it, **wanted to keep separate that which cannot be separated: the Christ and the Cross.** That's why Jesus said, "You are a stumbling block to me (in Greek, "skandolon"):

- + You are *scandalizing* my whole reason for being here.
- + You are trying to conform my **divine** reason for being here to your **worldly**

wishes, and this is the most dangerous thing you can do, for the *world always wants to separate the Christ and the Cross*. That is why he castigated Peter like he did.

Jesus rejects Peter's *worldly* understanding of his mission, and he absolutely rejects the same sort of thinking that survives and thrives today. That was Peter's error. And it *is* sometimes our own, when we, even for one second, believe that this faith we profess and this God in whom we say we have that faith, is **separate from an unconditional call to deny one's self and take up the Cross**.

This is what Jesus said to Peter and this is what he says to us: **"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, that is, those who would separate the call to faith from the call to take up the Cross, *they will lose their life*; and those who lose their life, who embrace the suffering for others to which the Christ of the Cross calls us, *they will find life*."

And we see in Jesus' vehement reaction to Peter, exactly what he thinks *of us* when we separate ourselves from the Cross, the Cross we are called to take up. Just as Peter became the stumbling block for the Christ of the Cross; so, the Cross of Christ has become a stumbling block for us. **We don't want it!** Let's be honest with ourselves, the Cross is a burden *we do not want*. It means pain we do not want to bear. It means suffering we do not want to share. It means commitment we are unwilling to make! But anything less makes the faith just plain fakery, a charade that mocks the Christ of the Cross.

And, so, he warns us, like he did Peter in the sternest way, **"If you are going to be about the business of saving your own life, you will...lose it**. If that is your goal, to place yourself, your own safety, your own welfare, your own comfort, your own life **first** above all others...**if you separate yourself from the Cross, you will lose your life**.

Now what kind of sense does that make? I mean really...not much. It is counter intuitive in the extreme. It is not logical! It is not rational, and, if anything, this talk about bearing Crosses, taking risks, and losing our lives in the process, might very much incline us to head exactly the other way. Now, **that** would be the rational thing to do!

And, that is the way a great many people live their lives. But you know as well as I, that it is precisely this self-centered, selfish way of living that is at the very root of...

- of hatred
- of racism
- of violence, like we just saw up the road,
- of abuse,
- of war,
- of hunger,
- of hopelessness.

So, if these are the outcomes of self-centered living, of denying the way of Cross. well, hey! Maybe **taking up the Cross is not so irrational after all!** Maybe the way of the Cross really does make sense, after all.

In truth, it is the only thing that makes sense...the only thing. How could it be any more clear than it is in our world today, that the **self-centered logic** which **denies the way of the Cross, keeping the welfare of old number one front and center**, is exactly what has produced a world rife with conflict and hatred.

And how could it be any more clear, that the Lord of the Church has **invested the church, entrusted you and me**, with the one hope for doing anything about it.

For, from Jesus comes *not only* the warning but also the promise:

- "Those who **lose their lives** for my sake,
 - those who are willing to **bear the Cross**,
 - those who are willing to **suffer for others**,
 - those who are **willing to risk it all**,
- and, who are willing to put their trust no longer in themselves but in the Christ of the

Cross...those who **lose their lives for my sake**, Jesus says, will **save their lives**.

Now, what does all that mean in practical terms? That's simple, not easy, but it is simple; it means that in order to know and experience the hope and joy of the Christian faith,

- + you must give yourself away;
- + you must make of your life an offering to others;
- + you must care more about others than yourself,
- + you must be willing to take the risk of giving yourself away.

Some of you are thinking, "Oh boy, I know where this is going. Now he's going to start talking about financial giving to the church." **Well, of course I am!** Why? *Because **that most certainly is a powerful indication of what we are committed to!*** Money is a huge part of our lives. Money means a lot to us, doesn't it? It does to me, I freely admit it. It's really important, even necessary to have some. And, to have enough, whatever "enough" is.

But money is the least of it. The much harder giving that God calls upon us to do is that giving away and giving up of what we **treasure even more than money: Ourselves, our own lives!** *That's the life we are in danger of losing if we try to save it; and the life we will save if we take the risk of giving ourselves away.*

These are not things you **must do** in order to attain your salvation; that has already been done for you in Christ's Cross. **It's a done deal!** And you can't undo it! *You are going to heaven, whether you like it or not!* You won't even have to stand in the customs line. You go right on through! Congratulations! I'm referring here to *Lutherans*, of course. If there are any non-Lutherans here this morning, well, God's probably going to save you, too.

Look, there is nothing left for you to do. Jesus has done it all. God won't even count it against you if you skip church on Sunday morning. You don't have to earn points! **And, that's the point!** There is *nothing left for you to do* to attain your salvation. *Jesus has done it all for you.*

But, we're not talking about heaven this morning. We're talking about the here and now! You don't have to earn points but there are things you are invited by Jesus to do, in order to apprehend, to capture the joy, the happiness, the sense of fulfillment, the gratification of knowing you have shared something of yourself with another person who was in need of you.

Okay. Now, let's be practical about it. Take an inventory. Have the courage of the psalmist who says: "Test me O Lord, and try me; examine my heart and my mind."

So, here's the **Big Question** for us, akin to that **Big Question** that Jesus asked Peter. *What of yourself have you given away? What personal risks have you taken in order to follow the Cross?*

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, and take up their Cross, and follow me." And, you will know joy beyond all measure.

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