

Year A, Proper 17 Jesus Rebukes Peter Matt.16:21-28

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.”

This is a far cry from the words we heard Jesus say to Peter just a few days earlier when Peter proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and Jesus says, “Blessed are you Peter. God has shown you this truth. You are the rock on which I will build my church. I give to you the keys to my kingdom.”

Today we hear Jesus say to Peter, “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.” What on earth happened? What did Peter say that was so bad?

After Peter had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus had started to try to explain to Peter and to the other disciples that, as the Messiah, he would suffer and die. This didn’t sit well with them at all. Here was their master and friend saying to them that he was going to be bruised and beaten and put to death. It seems only natural that Peter would be upset and cry out, “No – this mustn’t be – you mustn’t die!” That was certainly part of why Peter cried out...but it wasn’t the whole reason.

The disciples believed Jesus to be the Messiah and, in their opinion, a suffering and dead Messiah was not a Messiah. How on earth was Jesus supposed to lead them to victory over the Romans and then rule over a redeemed world – God’s kingdom here on earth – if he were dead? That didn’t make sense and so Peter cries out “Whoa – you can’t die...the Messiah doesn’t die.”

Jesus was very familiar with what the Jewish people thought the Messiah would be like – a glorious king leading his people to victory – and he knew he was not that kind of Messiah. But maybe, being fully human, Jesus found that idea attractive. It sure was a lot more appealing than being beaten, and then dying an excruciatingly painful and humiliating death on the cross. Peter had placed in front of Jesus the temptation to live, the temptation to ignore God’s will and do it his own way. He had thousands of followers. He could be their king and lead a revolt...

But no – that was the world’s way, not God’s way and so Jesus forcefully denied the temptation placed in front of him – “Get behind me Satan – your way is the world’s way and I will stay true to God’s way.”

The world’s way values power based on money, social status, and military strength. The world’s way creates upper class and lower class; the rich and the famous and the nobodies; those who are “in” and those who are “out”.

Jesus rejected all of this when he rejected Peter's idea of him as the glorious king type of Messiah. Jesus embraced God's plan for salvation – the plan in which all of creation would be in a loving relationship with God and with each other. He embraced this plan even though it meant certain death.

As always, after Jesus has told his disciples a new teaching – in this case, that their idea of the Messiah is not the type of Messiah he is – Jesus goes on to explain to let the disciples (and us) know what we're supposed to do about this new teaching because, as always, hearers of the word must also be doers of the word. So, Jesus says if we want to be his followers, we must deny ourselves...take up our cross and follow him. From this comes the saying "we all have a cross to bear" or "this is my cross that I have to bear". People hear Jesus say to take up our cross and follow him and think that it means we need to suffer in order to follow him. While everyone will experience some pain and hardship, God does not want us to suffer. He is not a spiteful God who says to us "My son had to suffer great pain so if you want to be in relationship with me, you have to suffer too." No. God is love. Jesus says, "Come unto me all you who are weary and have heavy burdens and I will refresh you..." Jesus wants to take our burdens from us not make it a criteria that we suffer along with him. When we remember that the gospels weren't written about us – they were written about Jesus and his part in God's plan for salvation – things make a lot more sense. What did taking up the cross mean for Jesus?

It meant complete and utter obedience to the will of God. Jesus has just finished chastising Peter for tempting him to deviate from the will of God and is explaining to Peter and to the rest of the disciples that they, too, must surrender to the will of God. In the Garden of Gethsemane – the night before his death – Jesus prayed to God, asking if it were possible for him not to die the horrific death on the cross but he quickly adds – not my will God, yours. Jesus denied his own will and gave himself over completely to God's will. Jesus also knew that through his death on the cross would come life. We don't hang crosses on our walls and around our necks to remind ourselves that we need to suffer. It's to remind ourselves that Jesus didn't stay dead. He defeated death. God resurrected him on the third day and because of that, we have hope for the same. We can live with joy and hope in the knowledge that God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven because Jesus got that future started for us on the day he rose from the dead. Jesus did that by surrendering to God's will – by changing what he wanted into what God wanted - and we can continue his work of revealing the kingdom by doing the same.

Jesus goes on to explain even further with words that sound quite confusing. He says, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

What Jesus is saying is that those people who cling to the ways of the world will be rejecting the life offered to them through his death. We are constantly bombarded by messages to accumulate money and possessions and with “every man for himself” sort of thinking. Having money and being kind to yourself isn’t bad in itself. Jesus is talking here about people who turn to their possessions instead of turning to God; who rely on themselves instead of relying on God; who accept the world’s ranking of people according to power and wealth instead of fighting against it.

Jesus tells us that those of us who say, “Not my will Lord, but yours: and embrace the ways of God’s kingdom will find life with Christ.

About 400 years ago, a Presbyterian preacher named William Gurnall wrote words that still ring true today. He said, “It has cost many a man his life, when his house has been on fire, to attempt through covetousness to save some of his stuff; venturing among the flames to preserve this, he has perished himself. Many more have lost their souls, by attempting to carry some of their own stuff – their own self-righteousness – with them to heaven. O sirs! Come out, come out; leave what is your own in the fire; flee to Christ naked!”

To deny yourself is to deny the ways of the world. To take up your cross is to align what you want with what God wants. When Jesus submitted his life completely to God’s will, he may not have known exactly how things were going to play out in Jerusalem after his death but he had complete faith in God’s plan; he knew God would remain faithful to him and he knew God would vindicate him. We don’t know exactly how life will play out but we do know that Jesus has saved us through his death on the cross; we do know that God will remain faithful to the promise of our redemption and the world’s redemption that he made to us through that death. When we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus, we don’t know exactly which paths we’ll take but we do know that all those paths lead to God’s kingdom.