

13 Pentecost, Proper 17, Yr. A  
September 3, 2017  
Matthew 16:21-28

Today's gospel is a continuation of the one we heard last week, in which Peter, when asked who Jesus was, got the answer exactly right when he responded, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"Yes! That's right!" Jesus replied and he re-names Cephas as Peter, the ROCK. And all would have been well if it had ended there. But then Jesus goes on, as we heard this morning, to say what it means to be the Messiah – that he's going to go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed. And then he adds that on the third day he'll be raised from the dead. I think it's interesting that Peter doesn't hear that last part, the part about being raised. He only hears that first part – the part about suffering. And he reacts. No way! In Peter's view Messiahs are the ones who inflict suffering; they do that on the way to restoring the kingdom of Israel to its former glory, getting rid of their enemies in a kind of glorious pay-back time. There will probably be some "collateral damage" but then as someone famously said many centuries later, "You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs."

So Peter objects strongly to the whole suffering thing. And Jesus, in turn, objects just as strongly to Peter's comment. "Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says. And just that quickly, Peter changes from the ROCK to a stumbling block. What was Peter thinking? I think it was probably not only the mistaken theology around what the Messiah meant. It was probably also that he loved Jesus and didn't want him to suffer and it was probably also a bit of self-interest: if that's going to happen to you, what's going to happen to me? I don't know about the rest of you guys, but that's not what I signed up for!

I'd like to look at this scripture and the one from Romans with that question and some related questions that I think these readings put to us. First of all there's the question about what we signed up for. And those related questions: what's the ultimate goal here? Where are we headed? How do we find our way? What kind of journey can we expect?

Like Peter, we signed on to a kind of world view that's articulated when we say that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God, or more succinctly, when we say that JESUS IS LORD. Like so many theological statements that one rolls easily off the tongue. And there are some people who think that just saying that is enough – say it and after that, anything goes. But I think that's not the case. Saying Jesus is Lord is not only a powerful faith statement, but in a way, it answers all those questions I put out a minute ago. Saying Jesus is Lord says that Jesus is the center of my life, that Jesus and his way and his truth define my spiritual journey and my destination. Jesus' life is the model for my own life. And just as Jesus' life meant suffering, death and ultimately resurrection, that is the pattern for my life, too.

I'd like to think for a minute about our life journeys and use Peter's life as an example. He had to grow into both knowledge and faithfulness. When Jesus says in today's reading that Peter has his mind set on human things, not on divine things, I'm pretty sympathetic to Peter. Of course, he does – to start with he's human. But in Jesus, God is doing something entirely new. We have the benefit of 2000 years of thought and prayer to guide us. Peter was fresh on the

scene, so to speak. If anything, he had centuries of teaching and tradition pushing him in the other direction.

I think it's helpful for us to look for a minute at Peter's spiritual journey, at his wrestling with these ultimate questions: what's it all about? What's Jesus about? What's my life about? How am I to live given the answers to those questions?

I remember reading about a French philosopher who, probably in the period of the Enlightenment, when philosophy taught that progress was not only central but that we could expect it to be steady, wrote that he felt that he was getting better and better, every day, in every way. I'm not sure that that's what we'd say about our lives. Because I suspect that rather than finding ourselves on this steady incline, moving, perhaps slowly, but always in the right direction, always deeper and closer to God, I think the more usual pattern is probably that exhibited by Peter. Think about it for a minute. His journey was a lot more up and down, more like a series of peaks and valleys. Peter's the one who gets out of the boat to walk to Jesus (a peak) but then, surrounded by the wind and waves, loses focus and starts to sink (a low point here!). Then in these recent readings, he's the one who gets the words right (a high point) but then shows that he really doesn't understand what they mean (back down again). Later, he's the one who protests that, no matter what, he'll NEVER deny Jesus, but then, of course, he does and not once but three times. But he's also the one who, after the resurrection, tells Jesus three times that he loves him and the one who is told to exhibit that love by feeding Jesus' sheep. But Peter's journey isn't just a series of highs and lows; I think that each time he fell and got up again, he got up with new understanding and a deeper resolve and a deeper faith. So up and down, but always on an upward trajectory.

And that sheds some light on suffering and how to understand it, I think. Because there's that other phrase in this reading, about taking up one's cross to follow Jesus and that to save one's life is to lose it, while losing it is to save it. What's that about? Because, after all, don't we spend a lot of our time trying to avoid suffering? If you'll remember the utilitarian school of philosophy, the whole thing was grounded on trying to build an ethical system on the truth that humans want to have pleasure and avoid pain. I suspect we all know what Jesus is talking about here. It's possible, he's saying, to try to live your life in such a way that you construct a cocoon – never reaching out, never loving, never looking beyond your own self-interest – it's possible, but what you'll have in the end is a pile of ashes. You'll be a bit like the fellow who took the talent and buried it. What he had in the end was what he started with – no suffering, but also no growth, no transcendence, no bigger heart, no transformation. What he had in the end was a kind of spiritual death.

Perhaps, as Christians, our fundamental statement is that Jesus is Lord. And to say that Jesus is Lord is to say that Jesus and his vision of God and of the kingdom are the center of my life. Not anything or anyone else: Jesus. And it's pretty easy to draw out the implications of that statement for our lives. We are to think and view the world and live as Jesus did. And there's suffering there already – because to live that way, to put Jesus in the center of the whole thing, is to take myself OUT of the center. That means many things but perhaps the easiest way to say it is to say that it means that I love God with my whole heart and that I love my neighbor as

myself – I know quite well how to love myself and to act in my own best interest. That's the way I'm to love my neighbor if I'm following Jesus.

Hans Kung, the great Catholic theologian, has written a book on these questions titled, appropriately enough, *On Being a Christian*. In the simple and concrete act of loving my neighbor, sometimes someone far away, as in Houston right now, Kung argues that what we're doing is God's will – which is about bringing the kingdom to fruition. Loving and doing what's needed for the person right in front of me or, in our modern world, the one I am capable of helping.

As I'm sure all of you have, I've been seeing some of the pictures and reading some of the stories about Houston. And some of those pictures are exactly what I'm talking about: the drivers of 18-wheelers rescuing people; the fellow who owns a furniture store donating mattresses; the bakery that's still in operation, churning out loaves of bread (having used 4200 pounds of flour at last count) to feed people who are hungry. No discrimination, no questions about which "tribe" the neighbor belongs to, just a simple and loving response to need.

I'd like to leave you with a final story. It's about a young woman who was asked by her priest to write a meditation on Jesus taking up his cross. She wrestled, she said, with the contrast between Jesus' life and suffering and her own situation. "Jesus takes up his cross and I take my kids to school, a private school, in a safe neighborhood, wearing warm coats. Jesus takes up his cross, and I take up my fork to eat something that I've chosen to eat from the many choices in my refrigerator. Jesus takes up his cross and I take up my knitting, in front of the television.... You can see how I might be having a little trouble here....The list goes on and on.... (How does Jesus' suffering relate to me? And then she thought that maybe a better way of thinking about this is to "look at our lives and think about the ways that what we have done and what we continue to do, adds a burden to the cross that Christ carries for the (world) and what we can do to lighten that burden....) It's not enough to just be a nice person...what I should be doing is lightening Christ's burden by doing everything in my power to live God's Kingdom here on earth...If I judge less and blame less, I lessen the burden. If I forgive more and seek vengeance less, I lessen the burden....I can do my part in lessening Jesus' burden if I radically welcome all people into my life...and by living as if the Kingdom was already here. (Quoted in Synthesis, 2011 - modified)

I think she's on to something! Amen.