

“The Hard Truth”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
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Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From 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. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But 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.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For 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?

²⁷“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

We continue this week right where we left off in Matthew. Jesus has been proclaimed Messiah by Peter, who has been blessed and told he would be the rock on which Jesus would build his church, and the disciples have been told to keep all of this hush-hush.

Today, the passage continues with Jesus teaching his most devoted followers about what will happen to him: his passion, death, and resurrection. They don’t take well to this lesson, if Peter’s protest is any indication.

Now, with hindsight, we may be tempted to pile onto Peter. How dare he tell Jesus what he should or should not do? But really, is his response all that unreasonable? How would we like to hear a beloved teacher foretell his or her own doom? Wouldn’t we want them to prevent such a fate from coming to pass? I suspect the universal answer would be yes.

But Jesus is doing something new and different here, while still in keeping with Jewish tradition. He is explaining the unorthodox, unsettling way in which the Messiah will behave and how his fate will unfold, all while offering a prophecy, not a recommendation or theory of how things will turn out but a witness to the acts of God Almighty.

Jesus is simply telling the truth, and it is something people do not want to hear. There is much that can be said—and indeed has already been said—about this dynamic, how it was true 2,000 years ago and remains true today. But I’d like to focus on something else first.

How one introduces oneself to others can set a tone, create expectations, or affirm assumptions. Do we use our full, formal name or something more casual?

The same holds true for what one calls another person. The names we are given by our families stay with us our entire lives; sometimes we love them, sometimes we hate them. This is also true for nicknames, which can be given playfully or maliciously.

Sometimes, names are given with purpose, as was the case when Jesus renamed Simon the Son of Jonah “Peter,” which, you will remember, means “rock.”

Today we see that a name can have multiple meanings. In last week’s reading, we were told that Peter was to be the rock on which the church would be built. This week, he’s an obstacle that will send people stumbling.

But that’s not the worst thing he’s called, is it? Jesus drops a bomb on him by calling his disciple “Satan.” Now, as we’ve discussed before, “Satan” in this context doesn’t mean the Devil, Old Nick, or the Dark Overlord of the Underworld. No, he’s just the Accuser, the opponent of God. On second thought, that’s still pretty bad, isn’t it?

Peter must have been stunned by Jesus’ rebuke to his response. He only wanted to protect his friend, to see him be safe. But Jesus recognized what motivated Peter: a desire not only to save Jesus but also to save Peter’s world and all its expectations.

Dreams die hard; so do illusions. Like just about every other Jew in the early first century, Peter dreamed of a different future, one that was Roman-free, in which the long-awaited Davidic Messiah would rule from the restored throne of Israel. He imagined this person triumphing over the nation’s enemies, leading the nation into a new era of glory. He did not envision such a figure going to an ignominious death. He definitely did not imagine anything involving bodily resurrection. So rather than stretch his mind, to envision something new, Peter indulged an old dream and succumbed to a powerful illusion.

Jesus did not have time for this. He knew how the story would unfold, and events were moving quickly. He wanted his companions to be prepared for what was going to happen.

Last week’s reading and today’s constitute a pivot point in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus had announced for the first time in clear terms what was going to happen: death and resurrection. He expected his disciples to play a role in the drama, to carry on his work after he had left the stage. But that would require a wholly new perspective, one that the disciples had to adopt willingly. Peter had to choose what kind of rock he would be: a foundation or an obstacle.

His quandary is not unique in the human story. People have faced this choice throughout the ages, right up to the present moment.

How do we view the Messiah? Is he truly the Savior, or is he an embodiment of our own wishes, biases, and political platforms? One of the signs that the Christian faith is in

trouble these days is the degree to which it has been identified with various parties. The answer to the religious right is a religious left—or so the idea merchants would have us believe. Perhaps the answer is that our faith would be more genuine if it informed our politics and not the other way around.

This is something against which we all need to be on guard. We need to avoid becoming the Satan.

The hard truth of this passage can be found in these verses:

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For 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?”

Now, honestly, who in their right mind wants to take up a cross? Think about walking the streets while carrying the instrument of one’s own demise, jeered by the public, and doing so willingly. This is what Jesus asks of us if we want to be his followers. This is the hard truth of discipleship to which we are called. I honestly doubt that God is impressed if we have a fish logo on our checks, or if we wear a gold crucifix around our necks, or if we slap a snappy “Christian” bumper sticker on our cars. God is looking for sacrificial living, for a lifestyle that is willing to take risks for Jesus.

We are being asked to be willing to lose our lives in order to find the meaning that comes from being with Christ. And if that doesn’t tell us just what Jesus had in mind, he puts it in terms we should be able to appreciate, in terms of risk and reward.

We have to make all kinds of calculations in life, choices about what is worth our time and effort, our dedication and passion. The bigger the potential payoff, we tell ourselves, the more worthwhile the risk. But are we doing the math right? Just what are we willing to give up in pursuit of our dreams or the false comfort of succumbing to our illusions?

We have all seen, perhaps even known, people who have profited while selling their souls. It’s not a pretty sight, is it? But it’s a trap that we can all too easily fall into—and Jesus wants us to avoid doing so. Full stop. Period. End of story.

Well, not entirely. There’s more to the equation here, not just a choice to avoid, but an action that is required. We’re not only told to avoid selling out; we are also asked what we’re willing to give up to walk with Jesus, to truly live.

Now, language like this can seem strange. What does it mean for us to be truly alive in Jesus? Aren’t we alive already? Well, yes and no.

We might well go from day to day, making a living, meeting our responsibilities, or just doing our thing. But when we do not place a love of God and service to him at the

center of what we do, we are missing out on something that adds a new dimension to our existence.

This God-directed, Jesus-shaped, Spirit-informed life lifts up service to others, not because it's what a platform tells us to do, but because that is how we best know our Creator, who came to serve us.

This life makes itself known in and through music, which in its beauty offers a glimpse of the grandeur of the universe that might otherwise be missed.

This life reveals itself to us in fellowship with others, not simply because having friends is nice but because it is the closest we can come in this life to knowing the Triune God, who is the very embodiment of communal living.

I believe that all of this is true, but as I said before, we need to acknowledge that the Gospel deals in hard truths. Jesus never promised a rose garden, an existence of everlasting delight where our every desire would be met. No, he promises us something different. We have just ignored what he has said.

Why is that? Why is it so hard for God's children to accept what Jesus taught us? We know from our own lives that a world of endless pleasures would ultimately be hell. Yet we seem to want to live in such a place.

I believe that we may be scared of doing the hard work to which God has called us. Rather than question why the Lord is asking us to climb steep mountains, we should take strength from the confidence that God has in our ability to make the attempt. God has endowed us with abilities and talents, and it is in our failure to use them for his glory that we will be judged. "Use them for his glory" is admittedly a vague phrase, but that is because there are so many ways we can do this: we sing, we teach, we serve, we worship. The list goes on. So, we should know that we have been set up to succeed because there are so many ways to worship God, remembering that we should look to Jesus for the definition of success, and not to Wall Street.

True, this is a very mainline Christian thing to confess. We Protestants like to start new denominations, new churches. And why not? Should not the faithful seek out ways to make their religious lives more fulfilling? Should they not seek to connect with God in whatever way is most successful, doing so in the knowledge that different things may work for different people?

This isn't to say that everything is relative and nothing is true. But it is one thing to say that every Christian should agree on basics like the Lord's Prayer, and it's another to say that we should all follow one prescribed, official liturgy. When we do the former, I believe we are imitating Peter at his best, building a foundation on which others might stand. When we do the latter, we are strewing the path with all sorts of obstacles that will

distract people from what matters: the Jesus who is the Messiah, who we know faced the authorities, endured his passion, suffered and was killed, but then was resurrected, securing God's victory over death.

We know that God is paying attention. Jesus could not have been clearer, at least according to this passage. But even without his words here, when we think about the God we have met, whose praises we sing and whose work we do, we know it is true: God notices. Because God cares. Because God loves us.

And that's why Jesus takes on Peter for setting his eyes on human things, and not divine things. We can do better, and God knows this and wants this for us.

I think we, too, recognize this—that's why we're here today. That doesn't make us any better than anyone else, and it may actually be more of a burden on us. We should recognize what is going on after all, recognize that we, just like Peter, can lose sight of the reality of what God is doing in and through us.

We can mix up our priorities, lose our way, even give up.

That's when we should redouble our efforts to set things right, to find the way forward, to keep on persevering—with God's help.

None of this may be easy, but it is through the hard yet rewarding work of faith that we will find new life, deep meaning, and true fulfillment in the love of the one who made us and loves us.