

Matthew 16:21-28

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." Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 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?"

"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. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

You know, putting our lectionary together is a daunting task. It has to be hard to decide on the various verses with particular messages that would help us all on our spiritual journey. They look through all the possibilities and then pick out 52 passages from the Gospels for each of our three liturgical years; 156 passages that will help us understand what God is saying to us through the four Gospels.

Last week's passage from Matthew was easy. The disciples were asked who they said Jesus was and Peter answered for them and told Jesus that they knew that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. It was an important moment and a powerful message that we all need to hear. It ranks right up there with "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" and "I am the way, and the truth and the life."

But there was another challenge for the lectionary team. Not only did they have to pick passages that teach, but they also had to make them concise enough to fit into a service that, God forbid, should go over an hour to an hour and fifteen. This week we see one of those challenges. This week we have the continuation of last weeks passage. Individually, the passages are important unto themselves. But it is only together that they give the full story.

Let's review for a second. Last week, standing in the middle of cosmopolitan Caesarea Philippi, where every religion known at that time was represented and considered equally valid. Within that setting, Jesus asked his disciples how the people thought he fit in. Who did the people say that he was? Then, after getting their responses, he asked them, given all that they had seen and heard around them in that place, who do you say that I am. And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And through that statement, through that proclamation, as we talked about last week, through his willingness to listen to God and be led by God, Peter was blessed and transformed. He became the Rock on which the church was to be built. He was given the new authority to bind and loose things in heaven and on earth. And he was given a new purpose in life to build the Body of Christ in the world for the world. All this because he was willing to be led by God and to tell the world who Jesus was. And we get the same thing, today. We get to step into the shoes of Peter, as ministers of Christ, in order to play our part in God's work of drawing all people to himself.

But that is only part of the message that needs to be heard, although that is where most people in the church would prefer that it ends. After all, it is a great, uplifting message. Be willing to listen and to be led by God and proclaim the truth that God give us, and receive the keys to the kingdom in order to help save the world from itself. I mean, let's face it, that's great stuff. And it is all true... but the fullness and the challenge and the danger that comes with that message, we heard this morning.

This morning we hear what happens, if we stop with the verse that we heard last week, the verse that says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, 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." This morning we get to see Peter, you got to love Peter, trying out his new authority. As Jesus was explaining what was about to take place, that the people would turn on him and that he would be killed and then raised, whatever that meant; Peter pulls Jesus aside and starts to rebuke him, and tells him that what he said must not happen. Essentially, he is saying to Jesus that all that sounds interesting and he can even understand how he, Jesus, might be concerned, but he shouldn't worry because the Rock has it under control now and he is not going to let that happen.

You see, Peter got the first part of the message, loud and clear. He heard from the lips of Jesus that he was blessed, and he was the Rock and in charge, and had the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and had been given the mission. Jesus could now take a rest after launching this little startup of theirs. The Rock was ready to take control, and to move into the corner office, and move forward with their task. In a stark reversal of John the Baptist's words, it was now time for Jesus to decrease and it was their time to increase. It was the day that Peter thought that the church was born.

But this we are given the rest of the story. Now we get to see that great power and responsibility requires great humility and sacrifice. If you want to be my disciples, take up your cross and lead by continuing to follow me all the way through to where I am taking you.

Today we get the second part of the story and we see that one part cannot fully live on its own without the other. If we decide that we are going to take things over and move things forward according to our plans based on our wisdom, then we end up like Peter on that day. We make the continuing story about us and not Jesus'. We end up deciding in our ultimate wisdom how things are to go based on our needs and our desires. We let the society, which is us, define the church instead of the other way around. We look to Jesus as a retired teacher emeritus, and say to him that we have read the Bible and we've seen his life and miracles, and now we are going to mold and conform them to the picture that we have for the world. If we stopped with last week's passage, we have the keys in our pockets and we will push ahead, binding and loosing according to our humanly led desires and agendas.

But if we receive the whole message, we find something more. We find a faith that calls us beyond ourselves in order to be our true selves. It asks us to recognize that there is something that is bigger than we are. That there is a God that created all things to work together for the good of all things and it asks us to understand that that God is not us. It asks us to deny ourselves, to sacrifice the illusion of our power and control, on the cross. It asks us to take up our cross and then to put our trust in something, in someone, that will lead us through that death and on to something so much more amazing.

And then it asks us to be willing to proclaim to the world, just like Peter did, who it is that we place our trust in. Who it is that is the Christ, the Savior of the world. Whose love it is that defines our relationships and whose truth it is that makes us whole.

When we can do both, the dying to self along with listening and embracing God through Christ, as the source of our new self, then we can and will be able to have *his* vision, and *his* authority, and *his* mission as our own. Then, and only then, will we be the church for our time. Blessed, with the keys to Heaven in our hand, taking up our cross in love for all people.

Amen