

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

We pick up this week right where we left off last week. We didn't skip a beat (or miss a verse).

So let me remind you what happened last week, because we have to take it all in together. Jesus and his disciples entered Caesarea Philippi, once a sanctuary dedicated to foreign gods and by that time a temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus, a testament to Roman power and control.

And it was there that Jesus asked his disciples a couple of questions. The first was the easier of the two. "Who do people say that I am?" What's the "word on the street"? And they told him: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Ah, but that was the easy question. The follow-up question was harder. And more important. "Who do you say that I am?"

All of the disciples were ready, willing and able to answer the first question, But only Peter, it seems, was able – or willing – to answer the second, all-important question, saying: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It was a big deal – especially because of where this conversation took place. To call Jesus "Son of the living God" replaces every dead idol ever conceived or worshiped; to name Jesus "Messiah" rejects any tyrant who would rule by force.

I said all that last week.

But what I passed over (somewhat) was how big of a deal Jesus made over Peter for his inspired answer. Jesus said Peter was "blessed" with a God-given insight missed by everyone else! Jesus gave him that name – "Peter" ... meaning the "rock" on which the new community of love would be built. And, yes, Jesus promised him "the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

And maybe Jesus was impressed not merely by Peter's insight, but by Peter's audacity as well. Words and phrases like "anointed one" and "son of God" were used to refer to Caesar.

Applying such terms to anyone else could be considered seditious. And in a Roman world that fiercely imposed "law and order" on its people, the repercussions could be extreme.

So it was a big deal. And Jesus said so.

And that makes the sudden turnaround this week all the more shocking. After declaring Jesus as “Messiah” and “son of the living God,” Peter should have let Jesus take the lead. But, as we just heard this morning, Peter rebukes Jesus, telling him how to do the job.

That rebuke of Jesus sets the stage for Jesus’ harsh words. Last week, Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, and called him blessed. This week, Jesus calls him Satan. Last week, Peter was the rock on which Jesus could build a future. This week, Peter is a stumbling block, getting in the way of that future.

And what makes the shocking turnaround all the more head-spinning is that the conversation we hear here this morning wasn’t something that happened a week or two after the other one. This is all one conversation on the same day.

All of which, I think, is meant to underscore our image of Peter as notoriously undependable. He could name who Jesus was one moment and still fail appallingly to listen to him, to heed his words, to follow where he would lead.

It all begs the question of why Jesus would single Peter out for such a prominent role. Why would Jesus want to build a church on someone like Peter?

After all, even before this morning’s appalling dimwittedness, there was never anything remarkably commendable about the guy. He was just a fisherman (everyone knew as Simon) who lived with his wife in Capernaum, where they shared a house with his mother-in-law and a boat with his brother Andrew. And then Jesus came along and called on Simon to leave it all behind to learn to fish for people.

And I suppose that it might seem pretty audacious that Simon could do it, just drop his nets and head off to follow Jesus. Except that Simon never really excelled as a rabbinic student; he seemed rather more inclined to bumble along.

Oh, he’d have his moments – like that time he stepped out of the boat and started to walk on water. But then, like the rock Jesus would later call him, he sank.

Once, when Jesus was talking about forgiveness, Peter asked how many times would he be expected to forgive any one person – as many as seven times? And Jesus turned to him to say that if he were to forgive someone seventy time seven times, he’d just be getting started.

Jesus took Peter (along with the brothers James and John) up a high mountain for some retreat time. And while they were up there, there was this transformative moment – and Peter saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Flummoxed by the scene, Peter blurted out a proposal to make three booths, one for each of them to reside in. The way Luke tells the story, Peter came up with the harebrained idea of the three booths because he didn’t know what he was saying.

And that was often Peter's way, to speak without knowing what he was saying.

On the night before Jesus' crucifixion, at the Last Supper, when Jesus started to wash his disciples' feet, it was Peter who protested that Jesus would never wash his feet. But when Jesus explained the reasons – how they were all part of each other and servants together, Peter said, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

And later, at that same supper, as Jesus reminded them all one more time of what was to come in Jerusalem – the same suffering Jesus speaks about in this morning's gospel – Peter seemed to rise to the occasion, saying, "Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you." Jesus told him that he couldn't live up to his brave words, but Peter doubled-down, insisting that he would die before he ever would deny Jesus. Later that night, of course, after Jesus was arrested and taken in before Caiaphas, as Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, a servant-girl said she recognized him; she said that he was one of the men who used to hang around with Jesus ... and Peter said she was mistaken. He denied even knowing Jesus.ⁱ

I don't remind you of all this to belittle Peter. But it all begs the question: Why would Jesus want to build a church on someone like Peter?

And the only answer I have to that question is to suggest that Peter is a stand-in for all of us. And Jesus still looks to us to take part in the building of God's future here on earth.

As individuals and as a community, we, too, have been called. And it matters not at all whether we, either as individuals or as a gathered community of faith, think we have the credentials or feel we possess the innate gifts needed. Oh, we've had some moments, I dare say, when our faith has buoyed us, but we've also known what it's like to sink like a stone. And we're probably no more forgiving than the next person. And if we are inspired by the reminder from our Presiding Bishop that "we are the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement," we may yet settle for far less than doing all that we can to help turn this upside-down world right-side up again. The idea is ennobling, but for all that, we are – most of us – pretty comfortable with the world as it is; it feels pretty safe to us.

I doubt I'm alone here.

And that's why I say, I think of Peter as a stand-in for all of us.

So be careful with him. It's not that he's terrible. It's just that he's so terribly human; he's both the rock AND a stumbling block. Be gentle with him as we hear about him on a Sunday morning or read the stories about him in the Bible. He wants to be part of the new reality, the help make God's dream for our world real, but it's hard to change; it's hard to give up the comforts and perks we enjoy. Take care not to label him a "screw-up." Better to hear a story such as the one we hear this morning and realize that he's just so human – and that's what makes him worthy of our love.

And here's the thing ... and to my mind, it may just be the most important point for us to pay attention to this morning: nothing that Peter does here this morning *un-*does anything that Jesus said and did before.

What I'm noticing (at least this time around) is that for all the harsh words of Jesus' rebuke of Peter, he never says to him, "You know what, I've changed my mind. Your name is Mud, and I cannot build anything of lasting significance on something so squishy, so I'm taking back the keys of the kingdom."

Pay special attention to that, for even in the midst of this morning's rebuke, there is at least a hint of a word of encouragement – for Peter and for us.

After Peter presumes to rebuke Jesus, Jesus turns back on Peter and says to him, "Get behind me, Satan!" (That's how it reads in the translation we heard this morning.) Those four words – "Get behind me, Satan!" – have been described as the harshest words Jesus ever spoke to anyone. And I suppose they are. But even there, there is a hint of a word of encouragement.

Way back before the start of Jesus' public ministry, Matthew describes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. At the end, when Jesus expels the tempter, he says, "Away with you, Satan!" It's literally, "Go ... Go away, Satan!"

And that's nearly precisely what Jesus says to Simon Peter this morning, but with one key difference. This morning, Jesus adds two little words: "behind me." Jesus doesn't expel Peter (as he did the tempter in wilderness). Literally, Jesus says to Peter, "Go ..." Yes, that's just what he said to the tempter, but here it's not "Go away ..."; rather, Jesus says, "Go *behind me*, Satan!"

It is, as I allow, harsh. Yet even in those harsh words from Jesus, there's an echo of that moment when Jesus first came up to a fisherman beside the Sea of Galilee, and said, "Follow me." Because what Jesus literally said then was "Follow *behind me*."

And when Jesus goes on this morning to explain to the disciples what it all means to follow him, he repeats the same two words. "If any want to be my followers," he begins, but again literally he says, "If any want to come *behind me* ..."

All of which is to emphasize the point that Jesus does not break relationship with Peter – not even when he is most disappointed with Peter. Instead, he reminds Peter of the proper place for one who follows. This is all a renewed call – like the one from the first – to let Jesus lead.

So when we tell the story of Peter – and we imagine it as our story too – it's worth considering the whole of his story, including the moment of his amazing call – and yes, all of his all-too-human foibles. Sure, recall the appalling failures (in Caesarea Philippi and in Jerusalem) – and hold fast, as well, to the constant and repeated call of Jesus, always inviting Peter to get back up and to get in step behind Jesus and follow where he leads.

In the light of all this, there is one final call of Jesus we would do well to hold especially near.

It was after those appalling denials on the night of Jesus' arrest. It happened on some other morning after that first Easter morning. It was a morning when the Risen One cooked breakfast for Peter and the others.

After everyone had eaten their fill, Jesus took Simon Peter aside and asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" And Peter said he did. Jesus asked him the same question a second time, and Peter said he did. Then Jesus asked again. And each time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Peter said he did. They did this three times, one each for each of the three times Peter had denied Jesus before his crucifixion.

Then Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep"

It was Jesus' way of reminding Peter of what he had said to him from the start, that he had a critical role to play in the building up of that Beloved Community.

From first to last, Jesus renewed the call to Peter. Human, like any of us. And yet, like any of us, still with a part to play in the kingdom of God.

ⁱ Most of these stories about Peter (and some of the way I am retelling them here) follow from "Peter," a reflection by Frederick Buechner, in *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1979), pp. 151-155.