

Matthew 16:21-28 and Romans 12:9-21

What a surprise it must have been to Peter just after Jesus told him he would be the rock upon which Jesus would build the church, that he was now Satan! Contradicting Jesus, not believing what Jesus was teaching, speaking out against Jesus' fate is what earned Peter, impetuous, outspoken Peter, the title of Satan. Sometimes when we are given compliments and praise it goes right to our head and we think that we have now become a perceptive, insightful advisor and might know what is best in a situation when we really don't have a clue.

That is what happened with Peter. Jesus told him that he was going to lead the people into a life of following Jesus and Peter took it to mean that he had the insight as to how Jesus' life was about to unfold in the near future. Jesus knew that he could not stay on earth forever. Jesus knew that he was going to be persecuted and put to death. But just like we don't want to hear that our plans are not going to work out as we anticipated, Peter didn't want to hear anything about Jesus' death. Peter had bigger, better plans for the takeover of the Roman rule; or at least he thought he did. So he spoke against the future for which Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples.

Jesus knew what had to happen for God's plan to be spun into effect, but he also knew the human pain of loss that was going to be initially felt by his death. He knew Peter didn't want to hear that the chief priests and scribes were going to harm Jesus; Peter didn't want to hear about Jesus' death; Peter most likely didn't hear, and definitely didn't understand the phrase that Jesus was going to rise from the dead. Peter thought with a finite human mind, looking at Jesus' death as a loss to the Jewish kingdom instead of a divine win for God and humanity.

The musical *The Cotton Patch Gospel* is written by Tom Key and stage director Russell Treyz, was based on Clarence Jordan's version of the Gospels of Matthew and John. Clarence Jordan has a way of telling this gospel story which sets it in more modern times. The place to which Jesus and the disciples are headed in the musical is Atlanta. When Jesus tells them they are on their way to Atlanta the disciples are excited, they enthusiastically parade around singing 'Going to Atlanta', until Jesus tells them he is going to die on the way. When Peter tells him that's not going to happen; Jesus tells him, "Get thee behind me Satan!" The disciples begin to sing, "Are We Ready?" and of course they are not.

Jesus tells not only the disciples but the crowd as well, that if they want to become his followers, they need to deny themselves, pick up their cross daily and follow him. "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?" The disciples are focused on going into Jerusalem to conquer the Romans and bring back the rule of the Jewish people as it was in the time of King David. They want to be strong and in control. Isn't that what we want? To be in control of our lives, to have the power to say what will and won't happen to us? For the most part we have this power, we do have some control over our lives. Yet, as Christians we believe that God is in control of everything yet gives us the free will to make our own choices. We chose to follow Jesus.

There's an older Christian song by Toby Mac where he sings, "I don't want to gain the whole world and lose my soul." It ends with the phrase, "May your kingdom be what wakes us up and lays us down." There is so much out there in the world that can draw us into the world and lead us away from the Kingdom of God. Material wealth, an overly inflated ego, addictions, so many things... When we look at the world for our worth, we lose what God offers us. When we live for

the kingdom, when we get up thinking of how we can serve God, and go to bed thinking about what we've done to serve him and how he's blessed us, we find life.

Yet even before Jesus talks about losing your life and finding it, he says that we must pick up our cross daily and follow him. Remember, we are on the other side of the crucifixion. We know he was crucified on a cross, laid in a tomb, and rose again. The disciples don't have this information. They only see a cross as an instrument of Roman torture and death. What a shock this suggestion must have been to them! What did Jesus mean? This was his introduction to telling them to die to themselves and live to God. The cross was a means of death. Daily we must die to our own selfish ways and embrace the ways of Jesus.

We heard how to live as a Christ-follower last week, but Paul, in his letter to the Romans, the second reading this morning details the way as well. He begins by telling us that love must be genuine. How do we fake love? I believe you can think of many ways that love can be faked. But God knows the difference. God knows when love is genuine. People know when love is genuine as well because it is demonstrated in the way one lives. In the same sentence Jesus tells us to hate what is evil. Hate is such a strong word. Yet we see hate lived out in our lives when a person shoots someone to death just because their skin is the wrong color, or their religion is the wrong kind. We are called to hate the evil that is living in our world. Not just to hate it, but to work against it with prayer, and when able to speak out against it, to hold fast to what is good... to live out of love. Paul tells us we are to do kingdom work with a good attitude, to be patient when we are suffering and to hold onto hope. We have the hope that God is in control, and it will all work out for the good of those who love God.

Then comes the really difficult part of this passage... to bless those who persecute you. It's easy to love someone who is nice to you. It's easy to return favors. But what is your first instinct when someone hurts your child? You want to strike back, you want to inflict harm on that person. Yet, we are instructed to bless those who persecute you. That's way out of character for our world. But it is what we are expected to do. Not to repay anyone with evil, but respond in a way that is best for all people involved. That goes against human nature! But we are to die to our human nature and live for the kingdom of God. Besides, in the end God will be the one to serve justice upon the evil in this world. We are to speak out against evil, but we are to act in ways that please God. God claims vengeance against our enemies, it is not ours to own.

Then the passage ends in a way that seems as though we do get to have justice as Paul quotes Jesus saying, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Doesn't it seem that by being kind to your enemy you will burn them? Well, that can be... but in the time of Jesus heaping burning coals upon someone's head was an act of kindness... Fire was something that was difficult to start and having burning coal given to you in quantity was an act of kindness when you had no fire of your own. Having no fire meant having no heat in the cold night nor any way of cooking meat or bread. Giving someone a way to start their fire could be a lifesaver. So, again, showing kindness to your enemy is a requirement, even though we don't agree, because we are instructed to overcome evil with good.

In the long run, no one has any idea of when it will happen, but sometime in the future good will overcome evil. Until that day we have the hope that is found in Jesus Christ. All glory be to God!