

Anyone who has spent even a little bit of time reading and exploring the bible knows it is filled with some amazing characters. Some are frightful, complex, faithful, lost, earnest, and many are a combination in some ways of all the above. I know it's convenient to say when it's the text you're given, but Peter is one of my favorites. Maybe it's the way he wears his emotions on his sleeve, maybe it's his impulsiveness, and maybe it's how he always seems to come up a bit short that make him so relatable. Regardless, Peter resonates with me and I find him one of the most sympathetic heroes in the bible.

Take this morning for instance. Peter is riding high on a wave of assurance from none other than Jesus himself. He finally got an answer right and was rewarded with not just extra credit but an exalted place in this movement of Jesus. He is in on the ground level of a new thing. He is the foundation, he is the rock. It isn't difficult to imagine his confusion and fear in today's reading when Jesus begins to foretell his death in Jerusalem. What about this new thing? What about this kingdom? What about the work they've been doing, the miracles, signs, healing? Why would Jesus

throw this all away? Can you really blame Peter for pushing back a little? So in one fell swoop, poor Peter goes from be the rock to a stumbling block. Like I said, he's one of the more sympathetic characters in the Bible.

So let's look at Jesus' response. First, he calls Peter "Satan." Ouch! It helps to separate our post-Dante and popular cultural understanding of Satan to really get to the bottom of this scene. I think Jesus is going more along the lines of Satan the adversary and accuser in the book of Job and elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. Remember in the Hebrew Scripture Satan was a title, a job description, not a name. Anyway, the point I'm making here is this; Jesus feels that Peter is acting as an adversary, and possibly a tempter, thus his short and sharp reply to Peter. Anyway.

What really matters in this section is not what Jesus calls Peter, rather, I think the key of the passage is what follows. Upping the ante by questioning his focus may seem kind of vague and open for misinterpretation, but Jesus' follow up isn't. "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?"

Jesus is making it crystal clear that following Him is going to look and feel different. This isn't a political revolution that many of his followers were hoping for. Like the tables in the temple, their understanding of the Messiah is about to be turned over on its head. So let's look at the cross. It was the symbol of violent suppression and humiliation. It was the very public and gruesome symbol of Roman power, what waited for those who would rise against the empire. So imagine Peter, recently upended himself, hearing these words. Basically the outcome of following Jesus is not only failure, but violent subjugation! Um, sign me up???

But again, like the tables, the very work of Jesus, perfected and embodied on the cross is the work that His followers must take up. And that work, spelled out in Paul's letter to the Romans this morning is the work of love and forgiveness. Isn't that what the cross of Jesus is about? It's not about a heartless Father demanding the death of His Son. It's about the Son taking on the sin of the world, not as a cheap trade in, but to defeat sin and death by overcoming its power with love and forgiveness. If you think that Jesus is just forgiving those who crucified and taunted him, spend some time in the gospels.

Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

If last week Paul in his letter to the Romans was focusing how to live in community, today this portion shows us how to live in the world. Especially with those we may be opposed to or even our enemies. Paul doesn't say when you are wronged, look for the moral equivalence to justify your bad behavior and do what you want anyway. Paul doesn't say further entrench yourself on your own side. Rather he says we must overcome evil with good. Where does that start? I can tell you with certainty it does not start by throwing each other on crosses of our own design and desire.

I'm tired of sides. I'm tired of winners and losers. I'm tired of hatred and violence, bigotry and intolerance. When the world about us is pushing us to one side or another, we must forego the desire to fall in line. The only side that matters is found at the foot of the cross, where Jesus took on all the sin and hatred, power and corruption, greed and evil of this world and overcame it all. Love. Forgiveness. If our walk is not about this, we walk in vain. If our words are not about this, we speak in vain. Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says. I don't see any other option.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen