

Matthew 16: 21-28 Divine Things and Human Things

The Scripture for today, is a continuation from the last week, where we heard Jesus give a nick-name to his disciple Simon “the rock,” saying that he would build his church on this rock, and Simon came to be known as Peter, the “rock.” But Peter was “Rock” only because Jesus called him so. I mean, although Peter loved Jesus very much, he was not always solid nor reliable like a rock.

In fact, Jesus’s choice of Peter as the foundational rock of the church, with all his imperfections, gives us the assurance that Jesus can use all of us to build his church. We who are not perfect but love Jesus and willing to serve God; we are, individually, uniquely shaped rocks; some with sharp edges and some so smooth, but in Christ, we are made to perfectly fit together to be his body in the world. The Church is more than the sum of its parts, and Jesus said that the power of death cannot destroy it.

But if it is Jesus’s job to build his church, what is ours to do? What is our part? Let us continue listening to Jesus. Hear now, the Gospel according to 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.” The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Here, the crowds are gone and Jesus is speaking to his disciples who have answered his call to come follow him. Having told the disciples that the church cannot be destroyed, Jesus begins to prepare his disciples for what is going to happen: Jesus is to suffer much at the hands of the religious leaders who opposed him, and be killed, and be raised on the third day.

The disciples are hearing this right after Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of the Living God. Here Peter jumps in again, this time, taking Jesus aside and scolding him! “That cannot happen to you, Jesus! Don’t say such thing!”

Peter had just been blessed by Jesus, presumably in front of other disciples, for rightly calling Jesus the Messiah, the son of the living God. And for getting it right, Jesus made him the foundational

rock of his church! Just when Peter was feeling high from this, Jesus started talking nonsense; the Messiah must suffer abuse and be killed. But that's not what Peter meant, when he gave the "right answer" about Jesus the Messiah. NO, the Messiah is the one who defeats the oppressors, liberates his people and rules as the anointed Lord. Jesus is kind of ruining it for Peter. So, he takes Jesus away from other disciples to have a word with him.

But Jesus, who a moment ago blessed Peter now calls him "Satan." Jesus who had just made Peter the foundational rock of his church now calls him his stumbling-block. Where did Peter go wrong? Jesus says Peter set his mind "not on divine things but on human things" and that's where he went wrong. Remember Peter started walking on water towards Jesus, setting his mind on him who had told him to "Come," but when he became afraid of the wind, he started to sink? Well, Peter the Rock sinks, yet again. And if it happened to Peter, it can happen to us.

So, what does it mean to set our minds on divine things or on human things?

It is typical of Peter to act before he thinks. Here, he rushed out even before he really listened to Jesus. Jesus said "he must go to Jerusalem, where the opposition awaited, and go through great suffering, and be killed, AND on the third day be raised to life."

The divine plan is to raise Jesus to new life, after having suffered the worst that the world could inflict upon him, even death on the cross, so as to overcome death with life. To yield and to surrender himself to this divine plan, that's the divine thing Jesus was setting his mind on.

He would have to suffer betrayal by his friends, public humiliation, and the despair of abandonment even by his God. It is in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus cries out from the cross, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But, trusting in God to vindicate him, Jesus demonstrated God's love for the world with every ounce of his being, till the very end, carrying his cross. Because he knew God would do More with him and through him beyond death.

Peter, on the other hand, is stuck with his human ideals of Messiah, who cannot be subjected to suffering and death. For the human mind, death is our ultimate enemy. Setting our minds on human things, our goal is to live as fully and freely as we can, progress as far as we can, achieve as high as we can, accomplish as much as we can; it's a race against oneself for self-actualization, before death calls time on us. To set our mind on human things is to focus on polishing this one rock that is our life, and to make it shine as bright as possible, while it stand on its own.

When we set our minds on divine things, offering our lives for God's service, God does more with our life, more than we ever could, tightly holding onto our lives. When we give ourselves over to the truth of life in Christ, the life of self-sacrificial love, compassion, seeking justice beyond one's own gain, our life becomes bigger than ourselves and we become part of something that endures beyond death. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

When we set our minds on divine things, our death is no longer a limit, because this rock that is one life that I have to live, is no longer an oddly shaped rock standing on its own, but can be fit perfectly in the larger, divine plan.

How we endure the cost of being the light of Christ in the world, the cost of loving those the world rejects, caring for the needs of those whom the world has forgotten.

Individually, we know the weight and the shape of our own cross; the resistance and opposition we endure when we try to live according to the law of Love. We may not be aware of the cross others are carrying.

I wonder what cross we are called to take up as the community of the followers of Jesus

