

March 10th, 2024

Matthew 16:21-33 “God Forbid!”

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” I wonder who came up with that little rhyme? This is clearly not the case. Try telling this to a child who is bullied by one of their peers at school, especially if it’s cyber-bullying which is nothing *but* words. Try telling that to an adult who faces daily verbal abuse from a spouse or partner or employer. Words do hurt. Last week Georgeanne and I were talking about texts that preachers dread preaching about. This is true for me when it comes to our text for this morning. Last week we read Matthew 16:13-20 where Jesus praises the Apostle Peter for recognizing that he was the Messiah. When Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonas! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Last week’s scripture ended with verse 20, and this week’s scripture picks up immediately after Jesus praised Peter in verse 21. This week, Peter does not get praise from Jesus. In fact, Peter gets the opposite of praise. Jesus calls him “Satan,” and for this reason, I do not like this passage, nor do I like preaching on it. It’s difficult for me to see Jesus go from praising Peter to calling him “Satan.” See, I’d rather deal with Luke’s version of the great confession because it stops after Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” But Matthew and even Mark feel that it’s necessary to highlight Peter’s “wandering heart,” and since that’s the theme for Lent this year and since we’re trying to see Jesus’ ministry through Peter’s eyes, we’ve got to address this text.

I’ve never been called Satan before. I had a neighbor from Arkansas who would sometimes say, “You got the devil in you child,” but she never called me Satan. “Satan” or “Satan incarnate” is usually reserved for serial killers and despotic rulers, not people who don’t want their teacher to be killed by corrupt religious authorities or the government. And let’s face it, that’s what was going on here. Matthew writes, “Jesus began to

show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Peter was mortified. “Why would Jesus allow this to happen? This guy finally admitted that he was the Messiah. Messiahs aren’t supposed to be suffer and be killed by the chief priests and the Romans! The Messiah is supposed to save people from the Romans and deliver them from the corrupt religious leaders!” So he took Jesus aside and said, “No! God forbid this! This will never happen to you!” And not only did Jesus say, “Get behind me Satan,” he said that Peter was a hinderance to him and that he was not on the side of God but of men.

Want to know why preachers dread this text so much? Because no matter what point we want to make in our sermon, it’s going to sound like we’re making excuses for Jesus. And it doesn’t help that most Bible scholars and commentators want to make excuses for Jesus too! My favorite is - Well, Jesus didn’t actually call him ‘Satan’ as in ‘the Devil’ Satan. In the Hebrew language, *ha-satan* is the title of a prosecuting attorney in the Jewish court system. The word literally means “accuser.” It’s like the story of Job in the Old Testament. The Satan, the prosecutor, was trying to accuse Job of being a phony privileged goody-two-shoes and telling God that if he lost everything, he’d curse God just like any other run of the mill sinner. So when Jesus called Peter a “satan” he was telling him to not ... be an accuser. Or something like that. I don’t know. Let’s just move on. Nothing to see here. No need to dwell on this. Besides, we’ve got to move on to Jerusalem so we can get to the good part. Easter’s just around the corner! “He is risen indeed!”

Sometimes we need to lean into our discomfort and just say, “This is an uncomfortable text because it paints a different picture of Jesus than the one I have in my head.” Going from “Peter, you are the rock on which I will build my church” to “Satan, get behind me” feels like psychic whiplash. Because we’re so familiar with how much words hurt, we wince a little on Peter’s behalf when we read this. So let’s just work with what we know for now. We know that Jesus and Peter were close. We’ve known this from the minute Jesus called Peter to be his disciple. James

and John were pretty high on that list too, but Jesus had a special place in his heart for Peter. We know that they shared an intimacy and trust that went beyond what Jesus had with other disciples. Some have suggested that Jesus rebukes Peter because he loves him so deeply, and because of this he had high expectations for him as the “rock” of the church. Perhaps we are even witnessing Jesus’ grief as he declares, “Get behind me.” He knows that Peter doesn’t want to see his friend and teacher die, but this is the way that it needs to be in order for him to fulfill his mission. That sounds a *little* less like making excuses for Jesus. I like this because it highlights Jesus’ humanity. Usually when someone switches that quickly from high praise to sharp rebuke there’s something else going on ... there’s a level of intimacy that goes beyond a casual relationship. At the beginning of this series, I said that we were going to try hard not to idolize or vilify Peter. This is one of those passages where it would be easy to vilify him. “Well, you know, if Peter had just kept his mouth shut” or “if Peter didn’t just talk because he didn’t know what else to say, this wouldn’t have happened. He deserved it.” This morning I want us to try to empathize with both Jesus and Peter.

Here's a question for you to think about. I don't have many at the end of the sermon this week, so I'm going to throw some in here and there as we go along. Who among you does not want to avoid pain and suffering? Who among you has never done anything to avoid pain and suffering, even though we all face it to some degree or another. Ultimately, this week's text shows us that growing in our faith inherently comes with challenges and complexity. In the midst of grief and hardship, can we stay rooted in our convictions while also loosening our grip on control? During the times when we're working out our faith, can we move through that season with an open heart and open hands?

Our text today was a pivotal moment for Peter. Peter had just declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He had been going through this exhilarating time of unwavering faith. He bore witness to some of Jesus’ greatest miracles and most profound teachings. Yet, here, he faces a reality that challenges his understanding of Jesus

and faith itself. Jesus reveals to him the difficult path that lies ahead—suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. This path runs contradictory to Peter’s vision of a triumphant Messiah who will establish an earthly kingdom. Peter instinctively seeks to avoid the hardship, grief, and struggle that would inevitably come along with Jesus’ path. This leads Jesus to say to him: “Get behind me, Satan!” It’s a sharp reminder that sometimes our well-intentioned desires to protect and preserve can become stumbling blocks to fulfilling our calling. Peter’s faith journey, like my own and like many of ours reminds us that faith doesn’t always shield us from hardship. As we reflect on Peter’s journey and the challenges of our own faith, let us remember that this kind of unraveling can lead to profound growth. Like Peter, we may have to face inconvenient truths and drop our preconceived notions. Jesus’ response to Peter reminds us of the importance of our commitment to God’s mission, even when it’s difficult. So may we learn from Peter and embrace the transformative power of faith. Sometimes, it involves leaning into the grief we sometimes experience when we begin the journey of healing in our own lives and in our relationship with God. This is because grief isn’t about fixing what has happened as much as it is about learning new ways to navigate the realities that cause us to feel disoriented.

Okay, here’s something else to reflect on this week: When your world unravels and your beliefs are tested, you may cling to what you know. As Jesus foretells his death and resurrection, Peter protests. Peter is fixed on the way he thinks things should go. He resists the pain of what will inevitably come. But Jesus is fixed upon his mission and calls Peter out. For everyone, there comes a time when your faith is tested and you will have to face difficult and inconvenient truths. We may want to take the easier path, the path with less pain. We may want to cling to easy or simplistic answers. Instead, what does it look like to welcome complexity? Can you stay fixed upon your convictions while also expanding your perspective? Let us set our hearts and minds upon God’s grace, trusting that we are always guided by the unwavering love of our Creator, even in the midst of grief and unexpected suffering.

“OPEN HANDS”

We are born with the ability
to wrap our fingers around another,
to hold tight to what we know.
Maybe that’s where the instinct comes from—
this clinging,
this sinking,
this holding on.
Maybe that’s why Peter cries, “Never!”
when Jesus must leave.
From the very beginning
we’ve known how to hold tight.
So I pray:
open up my hands.
Uncurl my fingers
one by one.
Loosen the grip
that I hold unyielding.
Remind me that birds must fly
and children must grow
and leaves must fall.
And even though
we are born with the ability
to hold tight,
we can learn how to love
with open hands.