

September 12, 2021 - Pentecost 16

This passage contains some of the most familiar words in Scripture.

Sometimes that makes the Gospel easier to swallow. Comfort food that nourishes our soul in a particularly satisfying way.

But in some regards, it can make it more difficult. If we've heard it once, we've heard it a thousand times so we think, OK, we've got this, you and I have bled this stone dry and there's little if anything more to be said about it. Give us something new instead.

I'll submit that some of the most readily recognizable aspects of this dialogue between Jesus and his first disciples are ripe for us to come back to yet again and take stock for ourselves and for our body as followers of Jesus.

Who do people say that Jesus is?

Some will say a compassionate and revolutionary teacher, whose message has been corrupted by the church. Some will deny he ever existed, though even the overwhelming majority of even secular scholars don't go that far. Some think maybe he meant well, but he must have been as crazy as anyone today who thinks themselves to be God incarnate. Some will see him as a stern, divine judge. Others a laidback, long-haired hippie. Ask 100 people and you might get 100 different answers. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus seemed to ask at least 12 and three responses are recorded.

21 centuries have allowed for a broader base from which to draw responses to Jesus' question and most people are far-removed from Jesus geographically. We are all quite a bit distant time-wise. But then as now, we only have so much influence on what others might think of Jesus.

Our response to the Messiah's second question, as it was for Peter, is more personal. If we've encountered Jesus

in the Bible, on our journey of faith, in a community of believers, that experience shapes our answer.

Let's look at what *Peter* said, though, and how that went.

Again, hindsight, and the Gospel record at the forefront of shaping that show us ...

Not well.

In some respects, Peter gets (and deserves) some credit for being willing to stand up and make this bold claim. But in Mark's immediate fashion, Peter, and every disciple for that matter, gets a tough lesson from Jesus. His response to Peter's response is, to paraphrase Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*: "You have said that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Because Jesus' explanation of suffering at the hands of those who hold earthly power and death – followed by resurrection or not – is not the script for a Messiah, a chose

one, an anointed one, a savior of God's people, as popular opinion would have it.

Which brings us to the startling and abrupt turn this conversation takes. To the all-too-familiar rebuke of Jesus to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Maybe you or I hear those words and it makes us hesitant to offer an answer to Jesus' question of "Who do you say that I am?" At least with any volume and within earshot of Christ himself.

It opens up another logical follow-up question ... who do you say *Satan* is? Again, responses vary widely, within and without Christian community. A personified evil. A red goat-like figure with horns and a pitchfork. The ultimate enemy. A silly superstition.

The ancient Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible gives us the meaning of "an accuser" or "an adversary." What might

Jesus be doing in calling arguably his most passionate and devoted follower his adversary? And what does that mean for those of us who may not be quite as dedicated as Peter was?

I think it means we have to be ready to accept some tough love from Jesus. If we are as close in relationship with him as we seek to be, we should be prepared for honest and sometimes harsh critique. The kind that's easier to take from friends and family, the ones closest to us ... on the one hand. But also harder to accept, on the other, because we know someone we love has seen through the ways we try to hide and cover up our flaws. I want Jesus to walk with me, we sing, but do we really?

The command to “get behind me” comes off a bit strange. Not a turn of phrase that's maintained much traction through the years, but for a follower of Christ, it's fairly straight forward. We are indeed *followers*. We shouldn't get

out ahead of Jesus and what God is doing, by way of our own ambitions or tired old models of what it means to have power.

In Peter's rebuke of him, Jesus recognizes that what he means by Messiah is the popular, maybe even *populist* version: a warrior leader strong enough to throw off Rome's oppression and then take his seat on an earthly throne and restore a kingdom to glory. But Jesus knows that's not the way God is going about it. That he is set to do something more difficult. More difficult to do. More difficult to understand. But something built to last.

And what he has in mind for himself, he knows will have an impact that is not immediately great, or even good, for those who indeed seek to follow after him. Elisabeth Johnson, a Lutheran missionary to Cameroon put it this way: "He (is not) telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be

the inevitable outcome of his mission ... Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others — using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God's love made known in Jesus Christ.”

Those wise words provide a meaningful perspective for interpreting Jesus' caution against setting our minds as his disciples on earthly things as opposed to heavenly ones. I've heard the interpretation that it means an emphasis on holiness, piety, prayer, spiritualism, not worrying ourselves with matters of justice, such as for the poor, the outcast, the broken-hearted. I reject that understanding. The earthly things Jesus wants his closest followers to reject are the power and the bloody consequences of it that those he

names have gone after: those climbing the human-made hierarchy, the know-it-alls, those who acquire a position for its prestige and then kick back to rest on their laurels. That's not what it's all about, Jesus warns. That's the very kind of thing that is going to get him killed and he knows it. It gets some who follow him killed. Though martyrdom is not something people in the United States are heavily burdened by, believers in much of the world: places like Afghanistan, North Korea, China, rebel-held territory in Colombia, they still are. It's hard to think upon living in that reality but we are encouraged to pray for just such things.

And the divine things: the care for the widow and the stranger, serving others and putting their needs before our own, going against the grain to do the right thing over and above the popular thing. That is the place Jesus wants his followers to set our minds upon. The example he showed us that he wants us to live by. The

Kingdom of God come to life. And it's good news that following Jesus there, through the opposition it stirs up, the obstacles that arise, that is made possible through his suffering of the cross and his enduring presence means it's not a lonely path on which he leads us. But we do face the ever-present challenge not to permit ourselves to get in our own way. Let us face it with courage and with hope. Amen.