

14th Sunday after Pentecost Sept. 3 2023

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

Last week, Jesus called Peter blessed! The rock on which the foundation of the church will be laid. Because Peter called Jesus, correctly, the Son of the Living God! A revelation that comes from God above.

This week, Jesus calls Peter Satan, sent to trip him and others up. Why? Why this seeming flip flop?

It goes back to the original question from last week. Jesus asks, Who do you say that I am? While he got the name right, Peter was stuck on the human definition of Messiah. A figure of military, political and religious- power, might, domination. Not the definition Jesus puts forth- arrest, suffering, death and then resurrection.

What happens to the church when we set our mind on human things? When the Jesus we proclaim in word and deed looks more like Caesar, Herod, or the other gods that people follow. Gods of pleasure, wealth, power, success.

Pastor and theologian Russell Moore, formerly of the Southern Baptist Convention, says, "Peter is seeking to adopt the way of Herod and of Caesar and of Baal- power apart from the cross". Power that comes from violence, force, domination. Not the power of God in Jesus- which looks an awful lot like weakness to the world. A power that stems from self-sacrificial love, grace, mercy.

What happens when the church goes the way of Peter in our gospel reading? When we adopt the way of Herod and Caesar? Russell Moore speaks regularly

about multiple pastors within the Evangelical tradition telling him essentially the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount in their preaching - turn the other cheek – love your enemy- pray for those who persecute you- to have someone come up after and to say, where did you get those liberal talking points? What Moore finds most alarming is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ, the response would not be, I apologize. But, yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak. His conclusion, “when we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis.”

I would add, because we are following not Jesus, but some kind of facsimile that the deceiver has wafted in front of us. Brought there with the same guile that led Adam and Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This is what Peter, the one who was a rock of faith last week when he leans into the Spirit given revelation, falls prey to when he rebukes Jesus for saying that he must die. This isn't how the world works- that's weak!

But... this is the only way to life that truly is life. This is the only way to life fuller and more abundant- now, in this time and place.

Do you feel like it is a harsh, tumultuous, dangerous time in our world today? Jesus says the way out is to follow me. To follow my commandment to love one another with the same wild abandon I have loved you. To show mercy and grace, to everyone.

You want to follow me? Jesus asks. Know that there are things in you- that you believe, that you hold dear, that are valuable- that will have to die. Which is okay,

Jesus knows about resurrection. Know that you will be attacked for following me by others because there is something in the truth of your life that will threaten them. We talked about the dangers of proclaiming the truth of God in Jesus Christ earlier in the summer.

But- what are the alternatives. You can gain the world- but what damage will you inflict on your soul. Will it save your life, ultimately? You can have political power, but what do you sacrifice to gain that? To play those games?

Once again, Jesus and Paul make clear how we are to live. We should ask ourselves, how does this image from Jesus and Paul in Romans stack up against the most visible signs of the church in the United States? How does it stack up against the vision we at St. John proclaim in word and deed? Or the one we as individuals proclaim?

In Romans, Paul uses love as the basis and center of Christian living. Love unfeigned, without agenda- genuine love, as Paul calls it, is not a once and done achievement, but a sought-after virtue enacted through daily practice and prayer. We know how this is done- it's how you get better at tying your shoes, playing the piano, playing basketball, working the software at work. Like those things, genuine love is a goal to be striven for, but never fully reached this side of the resurrection. Why? Because we are human, and we'll fall short.

But this is what the Body of Christ that is the church looks like when we lean into Jesus' definition of who he is. Of what it means to be Messiah. This is the Body that Lydia is baptized into today.

A place where we hold onto what is good, what Jesus calls us to- not the world, with the same fierce grip of a person clinging to a life preserver on the sea.

Where we are not hesitant to show our best as we serve Jesus.

Where, even in the midst of difficult times, we can rejoice in what is sure... that in Jesus, God has overcome the world. That with Jesus, all things are possible.

Where we are given the strength to endure the pressure and tribulation that falls on us. Because we constantly attend to our conversation with God in prayer.

Where we participate in sharing our gifts to help fulfill the needs of the world.

Where we are aggressively hospitable to strangers. Welcoming them as if they were kin, because they too are made in the image of God.

How does that match what you are taught in your business, or on the football field, in the media, or in the classroom about how to live? It might sound a bit similar, but then we get to the next part.

Someone chases after you to do you harm, speak well of them. Bless them. Not clear enough, bless them and do not curse them. Empathize with those around you- if they rejoice, rejoice alongside them so that you might understand. If they weep, weep alongside them so that you might understand. In this way we live in harmony with one another. What I love about that word is that unlike melody, we aren't singing the same notes, but we attune to one another so well that we tweak our living to match theirs in such a way it makes both our lives better.

Paul reminds us to be humble, to right size our own wisdom and ego. Then he returns to those who abuse us. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is beautiful in the sight of all. And in what you control, live peaceably with everyone. If your enemy is hungry, feed them. Thirsty, give them something

to drink. Just as you would for anyone who is created in the image of God. That's loving your enemy and praying for those who persecute you. All of this is what it looks like to live out the love of God in Jesus Christ for one another. This is what it looks like when we get it right.

A church that deals not in power, but powerlessness. That stands up for the weak and lowly not with gun and might, but with our very bodies.

One that daily works to perfect the genuine love that Paul calls us to strive for. That Jesus demonstrates.

This is a calling that will require work to perfect, from now to the end of our days. Are we ready to spend as much time praying as we are texting? Are we ready to spend as much time in scripture hearing the story of God's pursuit of us, of God's people, as we do on our screens?

Are we ready to say to the world, our God in Jesus calls me not to hate you, but to love you with wild abandon. Not to dismiss you, but to see you. To come alongside you in your joy, and pain- troubles and triumphs so that I might better understand you.

Of course you are, because you are here. We gather together because we know we need this community of imperfect followers of Jesus to help us better live up to this vision Jesus and Paul present to us. We know we need to practice with one another how to love, we know we need to spend time at the feet of Jesus in the reading of scripture, we know we need to pray together. We know we need to dip again into these waters of baptism- a continual wellspring of resurrection in our lives. We know we need to share this meal of bread and wine, Jesus' own

self. To sit at the table with all those saints going back to Peter and the other disciples.

We need this, so that we might not be led astray from who Jesus really is and what his power means for us.

Jesus looks at each of us today and invites us, come- follow me and you will find life fuller and more abundant.