

**Sermon** September 3, 2023  
[Matthew 16:21-28]

*What's with Peter?*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace this morning, from God the Creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

Over the past few weeks, we've been hearing a lot about Peter, the chief disciple, the one who is always named first whenever we see a list of disciples. The one who is identified in Mark's Gospel by name, as opposed to the other disciples who follow Jesus, which is to say, it will tell us, "Peter and the other disciples."

We've heard a lot about Peter over the last few weeks, because, with one exception, he's been the focus at this point in the Gospel of Matthew. Since next Sunday's Gospel reading will not mention Peter, but today's does, we have an opportunity to recap and conclude the attention we've been giving to this chief disciple.

Let's start, then, with the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: August 13. There we heard an *incredible* defense of Peter by his *amazing* defense attorney, who stands before you now, and who will be opening a law practice next door to the church 😊. There we heard a defense of Peter: how instead of condemning him for weak faith, Jesus should have praised him, as the only one among the disciples who *got out of the boat and tried to walk on the water* – even though, of course, he ultimately failed.

And why is that significant? My intent in interpreting the story that way, was to challenge all of us. This is a church that has gotten out of the boat many times. If it hadn't, we wouldn't have the beautiful organ we have at the back of the church; we wouldn't have the amazing Cantor we have; we wouldn't have had Terry Anderson, the great Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator that we had; we wouldn't have, more recently, refurbished the chapel. We wouldn't have a lot of things if, over the course of this congregation's history, the church [hadn't] decided to get out of the boat and risk failure in the name of faith. I commend you for that.

The intent, again, was to challenge all of us. After all, as the great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard puts it, "When you read God's word, you must constantly say to yourself during the reading, 'It is talking to me. It is talking about me.'"

Let me repeat that, because it's really important. "When you read the Bible," Kierkegaard says, "You should read it with these observations in mind: 'It is talking to me, it is talking about me.'" Kierkegaard, writing in the middle of the 19th century, was concerned that many scholars in particular had overtaken Biblical studies by identifying what he referred to as "the frame of the mirror, rather than looking into the mirror itself," which reflects back on us; the frame of the Bible, in this case, the mirror being the central part. Kierkegaard insisted that by reading the Bible looking only at its

frame, we were doing a disservice not only to God's word, but to ourselves. So, he commended the approach I just quoted.

Next, that is to say last week, the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 27: We heard about Peter's confession in Matthew:16, that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Messiah of God, or in more contemporary language, that Jesus is God's ambassador, the task of which was to usher in God's coming reign. For this answer, Jesus ostensibly praised Peter, the person, as the Rock. An alternative interpretation which I offered, reflecting the views of Martin Luther, was that it wasn't Peter *the person* Jesus praised, it was the *proclamation* of Peter, that "Jesus is the Christ."

"On that proclamation," Martin Luther argues, "stands or falls the entire Church."

So, Peter is praised for what he says, not simply for who he is, and that distinguishes, historically, the Roman Catholic tradition on this issue from the Lutheran tradition on this issue. Once again, however we wish to interpret it, Peter got it right. When Kierkegaard tells us to "read the Bible as if it was talking to us, as well as about us," it is easy, therefore, to congratulate ourselves. After all, Peter got it right! Peter loved the Lord, just like *we* get it right. Just like *we* love the Lord. *We are Peter* in those moments, you might say; we are Peter, insofar as he confesses Jesus as the Christ, and we are Peter insofar as he exhibits faith, in contrast to the other eleven, who in the case of that story, remained in the boat.

Now because Peter loved the Lord, because Peter confessed, and because Peter expressed his concern, his fear that Jesus would suffer and die, Martin Luther writes, "I am fond of believing what is written about St. Peter, that after Jesus's ascension, Peter wept so often that he was in the habit of always covering his eyes with a little handkerchief because they were raw from his tears. And whatever, or whenever, he would be asked why he was crying like this and hurting his eyes" – tears sting, as a lot of you know – "he would answer that as often as he remembered this sweetest conversation of Christ, he was unable to refrain from tears."

Of course, if you and I were in a similar position, *we* would correctly confess Jesus as Messiah, wouldn't we? *We* wouldn't let fear or anxiety overtake us, would we? No, we're Lutherans! We're called to sin boldly, but believe or trust more boldly still! That's great.

But everything changes when we get to our Gospel reading for today, doesn't it? Take a look at Matthew 16:21-23. It's here, after Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, that 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. (Notice how it doesn't say "the Jews" – it says *the leaders*, the elders, rather, the priests and scribes) and be killed, and on the third day be raised again.

“And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, to chastise him, saying, ‘God forbid it, this must never happen to you.’”

And that’s when Jesus turns to Peter and says, “Get behind me Satan!” – which seems a little harsh, doesn’t it? – “Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block for me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.”

Now it’s easy to get caught up here, again, in the minutiae, in the, I would say, peripheral details. Did Jesus actually predict, like Nostradamus, that he was going to die in this very specific way? I would say, at minimum, he knew full well, because of what he was doing and preaching, he would attract the attention, not only of the Roman authorities, but the authorities of his own faith tradition.

Knowing that, he nevertheless pressed on, he ventured forth to Jerusalem, recognizing that the only way to bring about this nonviolent revolution he was advocating was to turn to the powers that be and confront them directly. When he makes that decision, a group of feminist theologians – a woman named Rebecca Parker and another one named Joanne Carlson Brown – say, *that’s* when the Resurrection happened: It’s when, instead of out of fear or anxiety Jesus turned back to his hometown, he turned instead to the capital, Jerusalem, and faced the inevitable, which he knew would have meant his death.

As one commentary puts it, it is likely that the specific details of Jesus’s prediction of the crucifixion have been introduced into the tradition after the events occurred, but there is no reason to doubt that Jesus foresaw his death, that he viewed it as part of the divine purpose, and that he forewarned His disciples concerning it.

Peter hears this, however, and reacts, as you saw. Why does he say “God forbid it, Lord, this must never happen to you”? Well, I think, as Martin Luther’s observation confirms, *he didn’t want Jesus to die*. Jesus was his Lord. Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was special and central to his life. So, of course he didn’t want Jesus to die. That’s one possibility.

Another is that he assumed Jesus was a different kind of Messiah. In fact, both may be possible; but with regard to the second option, Judas, as I’ve argued before, seemed to assume that the kind of Messiah Jesus was, was the violent revolutionary, the one who would lead His followers to overthrow the Roman government by way of weapons and arms, or the sword. That’s the Messiah that some Jews at the time were expecting. And it seems to be the case, at least possibly here, that Peter was one of them. The Messiah would not be crucified, the most ignoble form of execution in the Roman world! The Son of God must be victorious! And so, for Peter, to see it otherwise would have been absolutely astounding, if not at the very minimum problematic.

So, this distinction is really important. You'll see Jesus and Barabbas compared in the crucifixion accounts; *Barabbas*, as you know, that word in Hebrew means "son of the Father." So, one Gospel, Matthew, says that his name was "Jesus, Son of the Father." So it's "Jesus, Son of the Father" versus "Jesus, Son of the Father." Which do you want, right? And of course, the crowd goes for the violent revolutionary. In Greek, it's *lestes*, which means "bandit."

Now, what I find interesting, and I've preached on this as well before, is that when Jesus is crucified, he's not merely crucified between two thieves, between two robbers. He's crucified, according to the Greek, between two "bandits," two violent political revolutionaries, who had attempted, presumably, to overthrow the powers that be! So Jesus himself, even though he was nonviolent, was reckoned a revolutionary by Rome, and therefore brought to his death.

My point in all of this is simply to say that Peter *really* got it wrong. He got it wrong in a big way. And Matthew emphasizes that more than Mark, which came first. In Mark, Jesus chastises all twelve of the disciples instead of singling out poor Peter. So, the title of this sermon is "What's with Peter," but it should have been "Poor Peter," because here he gets slammed by Jesus.

"When Peter earns Jesus's 'Get behind me, Satan,'" one commentary writes, "When he hears that rebuke, Peter does so by expressing aloud what was probably the view of *all* the disciples Mark 8:33. "*Looking at his disciples*, Jesus rebuked Peter."

So in Matthew, it's much more intense, much more laser-focused. Jesus – and anybody who's ever been in the situation in a classroom knows how embarrassing it is when you are rebuked by a teacher in front of your classmates. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit tradition, used to say of teachers, "Praise in public, rebuke in private." Well, Jesus didn't quite follow St. Ignatius's advice, had he heard it, did he? Instead, at least according to Matthew's account, Peter was singled out and rebuked for getting it wrong, for not understanding that the Messiah came not simply to overcome the Roman government, but to suffer and die, in the process overcoming even death itself.

In this case, therefore, it's a little harder to identify with Peter, isn't it? But remember Kierkegaard's words. In Peter's unwillingness to accept of Jesus that he will suffer and die, instead of being victorious in glory over the Roman government; and in Peter's unwillingness to suffer and die, presumably, for Christ's sake, to take up the cross, as Jesus talks about subsequently, Peter represents each of us. He's a failure. His faith is weak. He gets it wrong. He's at fault.

After all, when reading the Bible, we must constantly say to ourselves, according to Kierkegaard, it is not only talking *to me*, it is talking *about me*. You and I, in this story as well, are Peter.

Now, why should we even read the Bible this way? (I know that Pastor Dan has this obsession with Kierkegaard, in part because he shares the same ethnic heritage, but also because, like Kierkegaard, Pastor Dan is completely neurotic, to the point of where he's talks third person sometimes about himself from the pulpit, weird. 😊)

But Kierkegaard, like it or not, was an expert on human nature; an absolute expert on human nature. He wrote the first psychological account of despair ever to be written. It's called "*The Sickness Unto Death*." It was published in the middle of the 19th century. Kierkegaard knew how often we fool ourselves, thinking we are better than others; how often we fool ourselves, thinking we are holier than thou; how often we fool ourselves, thinking, "If I were in that position, I would have got it right;" and how often, because we fool ourselves, we judge other people. So that's why we consider Kierkegaard; he gets it right, I believe, about human nature.

Secondly, Kierkegaard's way of reading this text helps us understand what it means to say that "we are saint and sinner simultaneously." Yes, moved by the Spirit, there are times in life where, like Peter, we get out of the boat. I've named some of those examples: again, the funding for the organ; again, the recent refurbishing of the chapel; again, the refurbishing of the kitchen downstairs; again, the hiring of a cantor; again, the hiring of a youth coordinator; again, hiring another youth coordinator. These are all moments where we as a congregation, like Peter, in a great way, have gotten out of the boat, (and that's appropriate, because if you look up, we *are* sitting in a boat, just a little upside down). This is where our faith is strong. So strong, that, with Peter, thanks to what has been revealed to him, we can confess that Jesus is the Messiah.

But my gosh, there are times when he fails too, right? Not only does he deny Christ three times, not only is he absent when Christ is crucified, along with the other male disciples, but also, in this case, when he gets it wrong concerning Jesus's mission and ministry.

Like Peter, all of us, myself included, are not perfect. We deny Christ in our lives when we live only for ourselves. We wrongly focus on strength and power – as in the case of Easter, which typically has all the pews filled, rather than the suffering and death of Christ, as in the case of Good Friday, where only a small portion of the pews are filled – even though this is where God promises to meet us.

But here's the good news. Here's the great news. Here's the news that should be shouted not only from the pulpit, but from the rooftops:

Peter, the "head disciple" isn't perfect, and neither are we. Nevertheless, God embraces us, not because of our victories or when we get it right; God in Christ embraces us when we get it wrong too! Our baptism, in turn, reminds us that ours is the God of second chances. Ours is the God of second chances. Each day is a new opportunity to start over and try again, insofar as we are constantly renewed by the

promise of God, through the waters of baptism, and with the power of the Holy Spirit. Good news! Peter was a man of faith, yes, but also a failure, giving us permission to fail as he did, knowing that God's grace will embrace us.

Now, ahead of us we have a number of new projects that are waiting. Will we get out of the boat? The Triangle Project, for example; the hiring of another youth minister, possibly; these are all opportunities for us to reflect the best of Peter, and overcome the worst, by way of the Holy Spirit. But if we fail, and when we fail, the good news is that God will be with us nevertheless.

Over the past few weeks, we've been hearing a lot about Peter; stories about how he alone got out of the boat and walked, however briefly, on water; or how he got it right by identifying Jesus as the Messiah of God, the Chosen One, whose task it was to bring about God's kingdom. But today, today, thanks be to God, we hear what Paul Harvey would have called "the rest of the story." You and I are indeed Peter, in his graced moments *and* in his failures, insofar as they are equally true of us all; we are saint and sinner. The best part is that God loves us, as Martin Luther would say, "warts and all." God claims the whole person, and each day gives us a chance to live a renewed life. God loves you. More importantly, or equally important, God frees you to try again.

And all God's people said, "Amen."