

Wandering Heart: I'm fixed upon it

“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan!’”

Matthew 16:21-23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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March 10, 2024

We've all had bad days, sometimes really bad days. But try to imagine how bad Peter's day became when Jesus turned and said to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” Imagine the feeling of being told by Jesus himself that you are a stumbling block to him, setting your mind not on divine things (the ways of God) but on human things (our plans and preconceived understanding of things).

By the way, it must be mentioned that from a Jewish perspective, and remember Jesus was Jewish, their concept of Satan, which developed over time, was not the same as in traditional Western Christianity today. **Satan was more of a metaphor rather than a physical being ruling the underworld as the personification of evil. The word “satan” in Hebrew translates as “adversary”, and indicates one who accuses, hinders, or tempts, such as tempting to do evil things. It stands as the inclination to veer off the path of righteousness and faithfulness to God, as that which turns a person away from the ways of God.**

A fuller understanding of today's Gospel reading, however, only comes on the heels of the immediately preceding passage that we explored last Sunday, also in Matthew 16. You may recall Peter had a mountaintop revelation in his journey of faith when, in recognizing Jesus' true identity, responds to Jesus' question, “But who do you say that I am?”, with “You are the Messiah, Son of the Living God.” Jesus responds by calling him “blessed,” and proclaims, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” By the way, the Greek word “petra”, from which we get the name Peter, literally means “rock”. If that wasn't enough, Jesus then gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Yet, in foreshadowing what was ahead in the very next passage of scripture, which we are exploring today, I added that Peter's mountaintop experience would be short lived, stating, “For we later learn that **Peter's understanding of the purpose and mission of the 'Messiah' is not the same and Jesus'.**”

That's where we pick up today's passage, which begins with Jesus providing a deeper understanding of his identity. Rather than claiming power and victory from his identity as the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus shocks his faithful disciples with the news of his impending suffering, rejection, and death - we call it the “passion of Jesus.” Not surprisingly, Peter found this message deeply disturbing because it did not fit his expectation of what it means to be the Messiah. Peter was so fixed upon his own understanding, and when that was challenged, by Jesus no less, he “rebukes” Jesus,

saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." It's interesting to note, the Greek word that is used for "rebuke" is the very powerful verb used to silence demons.

Even though Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah, he does not understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah. In first-century Palestine, a prevailing view was that the Messiah would come and lead a military triumph over the Roman imperial occupiers, thus restoring the majestic kingdom founded by David a thousand years earlier. Jesus, however, counters that nationalistic triumphalism when he describes the true nature of his messiahship. **Instead of coming forth in a blaze of glory with swords and chariots, deliverance will come in the form of Jesus' own great suffering, rejection, and even death – followed by resurrection.** Our Lenten resource material makes the following connection to our own journey of faith when what we believe is challenged. It states:

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 upon the way *he* thinks things should go; he resists the pain of what will come. But Jesus is fixed upon his calling 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?"**

Progressive Christianity can partially be defined by that last line, to stay fixed upon our convictions while also expanding our perspective. **Jesus challenges Peter, and us, to have an open mind, rather than one that is closed by a sense of certainty and control, especially when it comes to Divine Mystery. Growing in our faith, intellectually and spiritually, inherently comes with challenges and complexity.**

Some of the folks who study such things involved in what is called "faith stage theory" call this particular stage in our faith development **the deconstruction of our faith. It's kind of a liminal in-between time, doubting what you once believed, but not quite sure yet what to replace it with.** That basically defines the experience of most who attend seminary.

Brian McLaren, former pastor, now author, speaker, and leader in what is called the **emerging church movement**, names four stages of faith. They are"

- 1) Simplicity, which is dualistic
- 2) Complexity, which is pragmatic
- 3) Perplexity, which is critical and relativistic
- 4) Harmony, which is integral and holistic

McLaren provides an image of these four stages using **the metaphor of the rings of tree growth. As our faith beliefs change there is new growth. However, like a tree, each previous ring remains a part of our journey of faith.** Not everyone, however, adds all these different rings throughout their faith development. For instance, McLaren states, "There are many forms of Christianity that act as if the only way to be a Christian

is in the realm of "Simplicity". [Which is dualistic, like, "this is right, and this is wrong.] And they think that something's wrong with you if you grow beyond that."

I'd like us to explore the particulars of how McLaren defines these stages, but at a later date. We did some of that this morning in our Adult Church School class. The stages are outlined in his enlightening 2021 book, which I encourage you to purchase and read, ***Faith after Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What To Do About It.***

The biblical commentator in our resource material, **Dr. Terence Lester**, puts it all into perspective this way. "As we reflect on Peter's journey and the challenges of our own faith, let us remember that **unraveling can lead to profound growth.**" Using the tree metaphor, that's like pruning off dead or unneeded branches to allow for new growth. Lester continues, "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. May we learn from Peter and embrace the transformative power of faith."

There is not a person here today, or watching online, that hasn't come face-to-face with **questioning many of the beliefs with which we grew up.** Faith development isn't easy. **Often based in fear, it's difficult to challenge and let go of what we think, or perhaps more appropriately, what we were taught, is the "right" way to believe.**

And yet, perhaps the most important point I can make in this sermon is this. Know that struggling with your faith beliefs is a healthy, in fact necessary, part of your journey. It certainly was for Peter. **Wherever you are in whatever stage of faith you find yourself is simply a reality of perhaps where you should be at this point in your life-long journey. And the ability and practice of accepting that we find ourselves and others in different stages, such as in the approach to biblical interpretation, is a way we can offer grace to each other here at College Hill.** It's grace we can also offer to others who need that grace, like perhaps extended family members or co-workers who are in a different stage of faith.

In other words, to approximately quote our own **John Gammie** from a conversation we had just yesterday, **"Your tree rings, even if in an equivalent stage as another's, may not be the same."** John asks, **"Can we embrace the diversity of our faith journeys in an accepting and non-judgmental way, thus transcending a hierarchical approach to faith development?"**

That is indeed a gracious way to approach our relationships with one another. And like Peter, know that there will be times when your, and my, understanding of a life faith is challenged, yet hopefully not with the rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, *Wandering Heart: Figuring out faith with Peter*, Lent 2024.

Four Stages of Faith | Brian McLaren | Conversations with Ps. Cliff

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSdLt-AywnU>