**August 31, 2014 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost**

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We’ve heard a lot about Peter in the past couple of weeks, including his most shining moment last week when he declares Jesus to be the Messiah. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he says in response to Jesus asking him who HE thought Jesus was. And he was blessed by Jesus for his understanding and willingness to make such a declaration.

*"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! 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, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Heady stuff! And Peter, being impetuous Peter, it seems he can’t wait to try out his newly acquired super powers! And once again, Peter, being Peter, gets it terribly wrong, which brings us to today’s Gospel passage.

The text says, “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, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

To understand Peter’s reaction, it’s necessary to unpack this a little. The word for show, *deiknumi*, means to show in such a way that the meaning cannot be missed. Some other words are exhibit, teach, demonstrate, and make known. Using all of the means at his disposal, Jesus is trying to make sure that the disciples, now that they have shown that they truly understand who he is, are absolutely clear, in great detail, on what comes next.

But it’s not a happy message. And Peter, as the newly named Rock of the Church, takes it upon himself to have a little word with Jesus. He hauls Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him.

Once again, to get the whole sense of this scene, it’s a good idea to take a closer look at the text. The first word to look at is “rebuke.” The Greek word for rebuke here is *“Epitimáo.”* This word actually doesn’t mean to chide or reprimand, which is what we usually think of when we hear the word, rebuke. It really means to warn by instructing, or to give a warning to prevent something from going wrong.

A good example of this might be if you see someone who is about to step out into the street when a car is coming. When you yell stop! or look out!, as you probably would, you wouldn’t be criticizing that person, you would be trying to save his life. You would be trying to draw his attention to the danger of the situation as quickly as possible, and in the strongest possible terms.

And Peter’s words after taking Jesus aside make that clear. He doesn’t say, “Jesus, you shouldn’t say things like that,” or, “this can’t possibly be true,” or even, “Hey, J-Man! Ix-nay on the uffering-say! You’re scaring the troops!” He says, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Back to the text. The word translated here as “God forbid” is “*híleos*.” It’s a strange word, found only in two places in the New Testament – here and in Hebrews 8:12. It’s translated as “propitious, forgiving, or merciful,” and in Hebrews, in fact, it means God’s eternal covenant of mercy to us. So maybe a better translation might be, “By God’s unceasing mercy, this must never happen to you.”

That’s a nice enough sentiment. Peter is concerned and wants to help. But remember last week’s Gospel. The promise was, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.” Whether he intended it that way or not, Peter has just called on God to stop the course of Jesus’ destiny on earth.

No wonder Jesus gets a little testy!

I need to mention Jesus’ use of the name, Satan, here. Remember that Matthew is writing for a primarily Jewish audience, and the Jews have a much different understanding of Satan than Christians do. The Hebrew word, “*satán*,” from which the word, Satan, comes, means “accuser or adversary,” and in the Hebrew Scriptures the word is very rarely used as a proper name.

So most likely, Matthew’s audience wouldn’t be shocked at thinking that Jesus was calling this guy to whom he had just handed the keys to heaven, the Devil. But Jesus did call Peter on the carpet for being a stumbling block to God’s plan, using a clever Matthean pun on Peter the Rock, and he accuses Peter of having his mind on earthly concerns and not the concerns of heaven.

Which brings us to the meat and potatoes of this passage.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Peter, the Rock of the Church, acted in a way that seems natural to us. Protect! Defend! Circle the wagons! Stop the disaster from happening before it even has a chance. But that’s the human, earthly way of looking at things. Jesus came to turn that upside down.

Those who want to save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for Jesus’ sake will find them. The word for “find” here is “*heurísko*.” It’s the word from which we get the word “eureka.” It means more than just to find something, like your lost car keys. It means to discover and to learn about something. If you give up your life, you will discover who you truly are – the person whom God loves and gave his life for.

This is discipleship. To discover who it is that God wants you to be, and to be that person at any cost – even the cost of your own life. Jesus isn’t just asking a lot, he’s asking for EVERYTHING.

But there are other ways of denying ourselves and giving up our lives than the obvious ones. I can’t let this sermon end without bringing up today’s passage from Romans, which one of my New Testament professors called the most important passage in the entire New Testament. We heard it already, but I want to read it again. As you hear it this time, listen to what Paul, like Jesus, might be telling us to give up in our lives. Hint: he’s not very subtle!

***Romans 12:9-21***

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Some of these things might even be harder to let go of than anything. Things like pride, jealousy, self-importance, envy, impatience, hatred, getting even, fear of poverty, fear of losing what we’ve worked hard to gain, fear of the Other and of manufactured enemies, and hopelessness and despair.

These are the things we need to be on our guard for every day of our lives, both as individuals, and as a Church. How much good could we do, again, both as individuals and as a Church, if we weren’t focusing on all of these things instead of focusing on following Jesus?

How much good could we do if, for instance, every member of God’s Church gave sacrificially out of gratitude for our abundance rather than stingily, out of fear of scarcity. How much good could we do if we stopped arguing about doctrine and dogma and things like human sexuality, and focused on, as Paul put it, contributing to the needs of the saints and extending hospitality to the stranger.

That’s my challenge to us all. Let’s find out how much good we at Grace can do, but directing our focus heavenward. Let’s see how much hospitality we can extend and how much we can contribute to the needs of the saints – which means everyone who has less than we do. Let’s see how much we can discover by giving up our lives to God’s service. By following Jesus. By being true disciples.

Amen.