

Rebuking Jesus

Let me start with a disclaimer: Lenten sermons can be different from other sermons. They tend to be more challenging. They ask questions with a sharper edge, and invite some uncomfortable self-examination. They are not for everybody.

As always in Lent, if you are struggling in your life,

if you are devastated by loss,

if you are despairing and hanging on to hope by a thread,

if you have all you can do right now just to stay afloat, you probably need to skip Lent for this year. Ignore this sermon and instead spend your time in God's grace and the love of Jesus.

The Gospel reading for today may be the most heated interaction Jesus ever had with one of his followers. It is especially jarring because of the timing. Two verses previous to this morning's reading, Simon Peter took a star turn as Jesus' prize disciple.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Messiah." Although Mark, as usual, skimps on details, Matthew tells us that Peter received high praise for his answer. Jesus even called him blessed, and talked about building his church around him.

In Mark's Gospel, in the very next passage, Jesus publicly rips into Peter, even going so far as to call him with "Satan," his worst enemy. How did Peter go from penthouse to outhouse so quickly?

By doing exactly what Jesus just warned him would happen. No sooner does Jesus say that he is going to be rejected by people who should know better, than Peter (who should know better) rejects him. Peter did not like this defeatist attitude he was hearing and so he rejected what Jesus was saying.

It may be that Peter overreacted to the praise he just received; that it puffed him up into thinking he was greater than he was. It wouldn't be the first time that happened to a disciple. Encouraged by his success as the disciple who got it right, he feels he has the chops to challenge Jesus about the direction of their mission.

While Jesus was speaking, Peter interrupted him, pulled him aside, and began to rebuke him. The Greek word translated as “rebuke” is the same word translated a few verses earlier as “sternly ordered.”

In other words, still basking in his success, Peter decided to not just question Jesus but to take him to the woodshed. He told Jesus in no uncertain terms that he was wrong about his vision for the future, and sternly told him to stop talking that way.

Peter claimed a better understanding of where their mission should go. Jesus talked about serving others, loving others, sacrificing for others. Peter could not see how that was going to get them where he wanted to go and so he rebuked Jesus.

Now what is wrong with this picture? If Peter just proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the one whom he would follow, then why doesn't he follow? Why does he suddenly act as if he is in charge? Where does Peter get off trying to run the show and push it a different direction from where Jesus is leading?

We know this can't end well. And of course, it does not. Before Peter gets very far with his explanation of how things are going to be, Jesus stops him in his tracks.

He comes right back at Peter, in even stronger terms. “Get behind me, Satan!” he says. And looking directly at all his disciples he says. “Don't try to twist my mission to the way you want it to go! I have been very clear about who I am and what my mission is, and I am going to continue to lead it in the direction it needs to go!”

Having listened to this exchange, do you think Peter got the comeuppance he so richly deserved, or do you feel sorry for him for his public humiliation? I would suggest that neither reaction is what this passage wants us to feel.

Because immediately after coming down so hard on Peter, Jesus then calls in the whole crowd of bystanders and says, “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 and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

“If *any* want to be my followers.” That makes it clear that this passage is not just about Peter, it is about all of Jesus' followers. Jesus turns to all of his disciples and the whole crowd and makes it clear to them, in no uncertain terms, that being his follower means exactly that. Follow!

If you want to lead, if you think you know more about God than Jesus and want to start your own religion, fine. If you don't like where this ride is taking you, you can get off at any time. If you do not want to follow where Jesus leads, that is your prerogative.

But if you do that, then how can you possibly claim to be a disciple of Jesus? A follower does not say to the leader, "I think I know a little more about this than you do. Step aside; I can take it from here. I got this." Common logic tells us you cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus if you do not follow Jesus.

Here is where it gets uncomfortable for us. It's easy to think this is just a story about how Peter got too big for his britches, and got smacked down for it. But remember, Jesus was not just talking to Peter; he was talking to everyone.

I would go so far as to say Jesus' harsh words are aimed as much at those of us in the United States today who claim to be his followers as they were at anyone standing there during that awkward exchange. Because the evidence is that in many places today, the Christian religion has been the victim of the very kind of friendly takeover that Peter attempted.

Do you know what has been the most discouraging thing to me as a pastor in the past few years? I don't know what the word "Christian" means in this country anymore. I know what it used to mean; it meant being a follower of what Christ taught.

I know Jesus taught that the great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. I know that he taught forgiveness rather than vengeance.

I know that he taught that "by this they will know you are my disciples, that you love one another." I know that he that taught when you serve the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner, the homeless, you are serving God in person, and if you do not do these things you are rebuking God.

That is what Jesus taught. If that is what Jesus taught, then that is what a Christian, a follower of Jesus should believe and should do.

There are people within the church who believe that and who do follow that. That is our mission at St. John's, and while we don't want to get too big a head about it, I sense that, for the most part, that is what we truly believe. I give thanks to each of you who faithfully follows where Jesus leads.

But now in our world, I find that I can hardly go an hour without encountering people proudly claiming the name of Christian who don't seem to follow any of what Jesus taught. They seem to have totally rebranded Christianity to better reflect their own principles and opinions and desires.

This rebuke of Jesus has become so pervasive that when someone claims to be a Christian, I don't know what that means anymore. I honestly don't even know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. Christian can mean just about anything. Jesus has become a figurehead, almost a mascot to be exploited for any personal or political cause that anyone wants.

In fact, if I am reading polls correctly, the word Christian is commonly identified with selfish and hateful actions that Jesus specifically condemned. And that makes proclamation of the Gospel, much less evangelism, next to impossible.

In our world today, I am hearing Jesus say, with greater and greater urgency, "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things."

We should not be surprised that this is happening. Remember, in the beginning of our Gospel passage, Jesus predicted this very thing. He said that he would be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. Elders were the lay religious leaders of the time, chief priests were the equivalent of today's pastors, scribes were what we call today theologians.

That pretty much covers the whole range of religious leadership among the people of God. Jesus said rejection of him was going to be widespread among the very people who should know better. He knew what he was talking about.

I recognize that this tendency to rebuke Jesus is not unique to our time and place. In the middle ages, the church rebuked Jesus' teachings by taking the church far from path he had taught, amassing fortunes on the backs of the poor.

For centuries, people proudly claiming to be Christians have waged war in the name of Christ, justified slavery in the name of Christ, have stolen, tortured and committed genocide in the name of Christ. All the while Jesus thundered, "Get behind me Satan."

But while we can come up with countless examples through history of people trying to correct Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God to better suit their purposes, I think we are especially susceptible to that today.

The reason I think that is because of an article recently published by the Harvard Business School. Addressing the issue of leadership in the 21st century, the article cited research that concluded, "Increasingly, *followers* think of themselves as free agents, not dependent underlings, and they act accordingly."

Peter tried to act as a free agent follower, claiming Jesus as his leader when it suited him, but claiming the right to reject or modify whatever Jesus said, to suit his personal wants and needs. How easily people become eager to claim Jesus as Lord, while they alter and redefine his mission beyond all recognition to their own advantage.

At the end of the Gospel passage Jesus tried to explain to them why this was not only hypocritical but self-defeating:

Anyone who sacrifices his principles for any cause, whether social or political, loses his soul. Anyone who tries to twist Jesus words to her economic advantage, loses her soul.

Anyone who tries to take advantage of Jesus' popularity in order to get or retain power, loses his soul. Anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus and then ignores what Jesus taught whenever it is expedient to do so, loses her soul.

Anyone who claims to be a Christian but is so uncomfortable following where Jesus leads that they try to modify Jesus' teachings to take them to a place they would rather go, loses his soul.

Jesus asks the crucial question: what does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose their soul?

Jesus came to save. So whenever people are in danger of losing their souls, their honor, their self-worth as a creature of God, Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan."

What does this passage mean for each of us, individually, in Lent? I proposed last week that Lent be a time of self-examination, of preparation for being an effective, joyful and passionate companion of Christ in the mission we share.

With that in mind, I invite us to try two specific things:

First, let's step back and evaluate how closely we are following what Jesus taught: loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Proclaiming and practicing forgiveness rather than vengeance.

How well am I personally following Jesus' lead by serving the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner, the homeless?

Where am I acting as a free agent, claiming the right to substitute my own agenda for Jesus' command that the first priority for his disciples is to be known by their love? What views, behaviors, or policies do I advocate that obscure the saving work that Jesus has done, that pull us away from following the one we claim to follow.

Secondly let's ask, "How do we need to prepare ourselves so that when this Lenten season of self-examination is over, we are better able to proclaim to the world what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Christ?"

What do we need to do, through our outreach ministries, through our caring, and in our lives to promote and carry out Jesus' mission of bringing new life to the world? To walk as a child of the light? To actually live up to the definition of a Christian as a person who follows Jesus?