

Pentecost 13A, Proper 17. September 3, 2017. Matthew 16:21-28.

I am not really a very strident person. I think my wife Jackie would tell you that my true nature is rather calm and retiring. So if you ever see me pounding a pulpit or a table while I make some point, I only ask you to remember that it is hard for me to do so and I'm either very worked up or really do think that the point needs some pulpit-pounding. But there are three things which I will defend loudly and to the death: the Christian faith, the Oxford Comma, and the use of puns. And so I am delighted today to be encountering this text that unites two of my unflinching passions. Because if you were here to hear the gospel reading from last week, then you might notice that Jesus is punning with Simon Peter here. Of course, because it's Jesus, he is punning with a purpose. (Which, incidentally, would be a very good name for a pun-themed charity fundraiser—a fundraiser, if you will.)

Last week we read the verses that immediately precede this passage in the gospel of Matthew. And in them, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was. Peter got it right when he said, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." So, first, "Peter" means "rock," so Jesus basically replies, "You are Rocky, and on this rock will I build my church." This won't have us rolling in the aisles, but it is a pun. And then immediately after this, in today's reading, Jesus starts showing the disciples that things are about to get a lot rougher, and that their work together will culminate in his execution and resurrection.

Peter, still on a high from his success earlier in the chapter, takes it on himself to rebuke Jesus and to insist that this can never happen. And after Jesus calls him Satan, he drops the long range pun bomb: the rock that would serve as the foundation of the church has become a stumbling stone. So, okay—the pun may be pointed, but of course it's not the point. So as long as we've established that Jesus endorses puns, we can stop groaning and turn to what the point is—which I think is that following Jesus is both more demanding and more rewarding than even those best placed to know tend to imagine. And that we are persistently setting up the not-quite-as-bad as the enemy of the good.

What is at stake here is what it means to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and by implication what it means to follow him. We don't know exactly what Peter had in mind, but it obviously didn't involve suffering, death, and resurrection. I think the most likely possibilities are either to continue the successful tour of Galilee, around the area where Jesus grew up; or an armed assault on Roman-occupied Jerusalem, which may have been feeling very possible just a few chapters after Jesus drew a crowd well over five thousand people. And even Jesus seems tempted by these options, which is why I think his response is so, well, strident. He is unequivocal: the path of the Son of God shuns the relative security of staying within safe comfort zones. And it rejects the poisoned false security that comes from turning to death to improve life.

The way of the Messiah instead takes more courage and a deeper strength. And following along on his Way of course takes those things, too. Jesus was relatively safe up in Galilee. Things weren't always easy, but neither the Romans nor the real religious elites were likely to get too worked up about a wonder worker up in the sticks, seventy-five miles from a provincial capitol. He could have done a lot of good up there, helping the locals, healing them and teaching them. But Jesus has to go to Jerusalem, because that

is where the powers of his world reside. He has to go out of his comfort zone, into danger, to take good to the seat of power.

And of course if Jesus had come with an army and taken the capitol by force, reestablishing the traditional kingdom in Jerusalem, things would have been better than they were under Roman rule. But Jesus isn't just out to gain a modest improvement to how the world works. He is out to transform and restore the world, to bring new life into the world, and for this an army will not help. Death cannot be the tool that brings life. Jesus doesn't use death—he defeats it. And to do this, yes, takes dying and resurrecting. This dying and resurrecting in turn frees the imaginations of us, his followers. We no longer are captive to thinking that our only option is to use the tools of evil to lessen evil. We do not need to make deals with death if we have that deep strength that knows that it is better to die than to kill, because death is always a treacherous ally and love in Christ has defeated death.

We, his followers, are called to show the courage to go in love even to those places where we are not safe. We are called not to settle for the comfortable proximate good that we can achieve without risk. We are called to be willing to die, rather than try to use death to further our ends. Jesus assures us that it is in losing our life that we find it; and that by clinging to it against all other loves we will lose it. This is a paradox, of course, but one of the ways we might understand it is as saying that a life that is fully occupied with continuing is diminished compared to a life that has been given to the divine cause of love.

This is, I admit, pretty stark stuff. But what Jesus said is also true. The truth is often uncomfortable, but it is always liberating and finally joyful. Peter hears “suffering, death, and resurrection” and is horrified. But one of my favorite ancient Christian tropes is of the resurrected Jesus dancing. Because while the pain is real, the joy is deeper. So deep, in fact, that Jesus' sharpest rebuke and prediction of his own death is punny. The richest life is one that does not fear death and so is freed from the trappings of false security we tend to cotton ourselves with. It doesn't fear death and so it doesn't settle for compromises with death, but pushes forward for life and love, which finally are the same thing. It is part of something greater and its successes and failures are understood in the context of that coming kingdom where Christ himself will reign with joy and love and puns and hope. Amen.