

Proper 17A 2023
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105; Matthew 16:21-28
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Last week we talked about suffering and about Peter's confession. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am" and Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus replies that he is to be called Peter, which means Rock, and on this rock Jesus is going to build his church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it. Jesus also gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and declares what he binds or looses on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. These are powerful statements built on a saving relationship with the Messiah, the son of the living God.

This week, however, we see that Peter does not understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is going to be. We can't see into Peter's mind, but most first century Jewish people would have expected a Messiah that would come as a political and religious leader to kick the Romans out of the Holy Land and create a new, militarily secure kingdom of Israel. Jesus had in mind something else.

Today's reading from Matthew immediately follows last week's. After praising Peter's answer, Jesus says that he is going to undergo great suffering, be killed and then rise again. Peter rebukes him, saying "God forbid it!" Jesus then rebukes Peter, going so far as to call him Satan for putting his mind on human things instead of divine ones. Going from Rocky to Satan in a couple of verses is pretty rough for Simon. Then Jesus tells his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. That those trying to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it. And it profits us nothing to gain the whole world but lose our life.

Jesus is a suffering Messiah in line with the suffering servant prophecies of Isaiah that we hear regularly in Lent and Holy Week. Last week we discussed how suffering is portrayed in scripture. The point is not to dwell in the suffering. The point is to recognize the power of God who is transforming suffering to bring strength in the midst of suffering, as well as wholeness and healing.

This understanding of suffering is especially true in the depictions of Jesus crucifixion. The Bible does not linger on the horrors of crucifixion. The details provided either show a connection to the fulfillment of Old Testament texts or to prove that Jesus really died, since if he hadn't really died, the resurrection wouldn't mean much. Without lessening the tragedy of it, we can also note that Jesus crucifixion was shorter than many others who were similarly executed. Remember how they were going to break his legs to quicken his death, but Jesus had already died? Even though there is a whole industry of religious products designed to make us feel the pain of Jesus' suffering, the point is not for us all to have an experience of crucifixion like Jesus. The point is to know that Jesus loved us enough to experience suffering so that we can know he is with us in our suffering. We all have plenty of suffering in our lives, and Jesus wants to help us with ours, not make us take on his. Jesus wants us to know his love, not his pain. Any discuss of the suffering of Jesus should lead us into the depth of God's love for us and help us deal with our own suffering, or we are not being faithful to the scriptures.

Only when we understand that our Messiah is the suffering Messiah do we understand Jesus' response to Peter's confession last week and what we should make of it.

First, Jesus says that on this rock I will build my church. The church of Jesus Christ is built upon the confession of the suffering Messiah. In Jesus Christ, all suffering becomes one in his suffering. The body and blood of Christ, on the cross and on the altar, unite us all into the Body of Christ. All of us are baptized into the passion and death of Jesus. This union in baptism and Eucharist means that we are united to Jesus in our sufferings, and if united to Jesus, then also united to one another. We can find meaning in our suffering because our suffering is now taken up in Jesus' own suffering, and when we suffer we are united with Jesus and with our brothers and sisters who also suffer. Before Jesus, each of our sufferings was an individual torture that divided us. In Jesus, our suffering can be transformed to strengthen us and to bring us together into an even deeper community of love. Since we are also baptized into Jesus' resurrection, we can be confident in the transformation of our own sufferings, since not even death can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Our church is founded on the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that unites us in our suffering and weakness, and transforms even our deaths into new life. The church is not a tour group of blessed people on the road to prosperity. It is a rehabilitation facility of suffering people coming together to find healing, strength, and recovery.

Precisely this church of the suffering Messiah is that one that the gates of hell cannot stand against. Satan is first and foremost a liar, and the devil's lies seek to lock us into the hell of our own individual suffering. When we look at these lies we see fundamentally why only a church confessing a crucified Messiah can stand against them.

Satan's biggest lie about suffering is that suffering means that God has abandoned us. Maybe we are led to believe that our suffering is the proper punishment for our sins. Maybe we are led to believe that if we were faithful Christians, we would have God's blessings and no suffering. Maybe we are led to believe that we wouldn't be suffering if God cared about us or was at work in the world. All of these lies lead us to believe that we are meant to suffer or that God wants us to suffer, either by causing it or not caring about it or because we don't deserve any better. All of these lies would tell us that when we suffer, we are separated from God. Such a narrative would keep us all trapped in the hell of our own isolation and pain, and it is easy enough to believe such lies. Suffering does isolate us and prevents connections of all sorts. Anyone who has been sick for an extended period or has faced a tragedy that makes it hard to deal with polite small talk knows this feeling. The church of Jesus, however, when we are living into our ministry of love, helps bring the ministry of Jesus' love even and especially in the midst of suffering. In suffering, we are not abandoned by God or by each other. And in Jesus Christ we are never really alone in our suffering.

The second lie Satan would tell us is that we can and even should avoid suffering whenever possible. This message seems reasonable enough on its face, but is insidious and dangerous. We don't need to go looking for suffering, but suffering does indeed come. Even the most charmed life ends in death. There is plenty of tragedy to go around. Trying at all costs to avoid suffering leads either to addictions to whatever numbs our pain or to escapism from the realities of love and relationships. Remember when Jesus said to take up our crosses and follow him? Part of

what Jesus is saying is that loving one another involves pain and suffering at times. We have to do difficult things for one another. And the crosses of our own suffering, honestly borne, are also one of the primary ways that we unite with Jesus and with each other. Recklessly seeking to avoid suffering is losing the important loving unity in our lives in order to save what is fleeting and impossible to hold onto. But when we accept what suffering comes to us as part of our cross, that suffering is united to Jesus' suffering on his cross. We can look forward to the transformation of our suffering in resurrection with Jesus, as well.

The third lie about suffering leans in the opposite direction from the others. This lie states that suffering is necessary to counter evil or stop further suffering; that where there is suffering, someone else must suffer to make up for it; that where damage has occurred, punishment must follow; and that violence and revenge can provide meaning for my suffering. We see movies based on this where we root for the protagonist gaining revenge on a loved one's killer, or for some tortured soul blowing things up in a seemingly appropriate retribution, or for a broken person becoming strong by harming people on the way to their recovery. Religious types can also lean into this lie by focusing on guilt or shame as mechanisms of behavioral control. I was once told that every time I sinned, it made the broken glass on the way to the cross more painful for Jesus' feet. There are so many things wrong with this statement, I can't even go into it. But God help me, it made an impression on my young psyche and I didn't want Jesus to feel any more pain than he had. Some theologies also declare that the suffering of Jesus was necessary because God wanted to punish someone for our sins and Jesus offered to be punished instead of us. As if God was responsible for the suffering of Jesus instead of that responsibility falling squarely with sinful, broken human beings filled with a lust for power and afraid of losing their political or religious importance. The truth is that additional suffering does not stop suffering. Causing more suffering does not add meaning to suffering. Love is what overcomes suffering and provides meaning. Refusing to cause suffering in others is how we stop the cycle of human pain and brokenness. Being willing to sit alongside others in their suffering is how we transform suffering. Taking up our cross like Jesus through the acceptance of the suffering that comes to us allows us to move through that suffering to healing, wholeness, and resurrection. Vengeance, punishment, and hate, either against others or targeted at our guilt and shame-ridden selves, only lead us deeper into the dungeons of hell.

As the church overcomes the lies of hell, Jesus also gave it the power to bind and loose. This authority was one the rabbis had in Jesus' day and is probably comparable to the ways some Amish elders can decide what is good for their community. People need some sense of the rules and boundaries that help them live a good life together, even if it is stopping at red lights and going on green ones. By giving Peter the keys to the kingdom, he is saying that heaven will abide by the decisions of the church in our lives. We can see, however, that this only works with a church that confesses a suffering Messiah and embraces all of suffering humanity with compassion. A church looking for power, or bought into hell's lies about suffering, or seeking control and advancement, sets restrictive regulations that exclude and oppress. A church that understands that we are united in suffering reaches out in love and compassion, seeking to loose anything that would come between suffering humanity and our saving God. The Christian church in its own stumbling, imperfect way has over the centuries sought to bridge us to God, repeated overthrowing purity codes and food regulations and any number of harmful laws and structures, even as human beings again and again try to re-institute them. Jesus Christ promises us that he

will honor the choices a church makes that is made up of, and caring for, suffering people. Jesus seeks a church that takes up its cross and follows him so that all may be brought into its community and reconciled back to him in love.

Jesus tells Peter that he is going to suffer, die and be raised from the dead. This message, as hard as it is to hear about one whom we love, is good news to us. Because we suffer, too. And in our suffering we are all united to Jesus and to a church made up of other suffering siblings who can help us transform our suffering with meaning, healing and wholeness through our presence to each other and the presence of God who is with us. With us even, and especially, in our suffering.