



Rock, Peter, Scissors

Matthew 16:21-28

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When Jesus arrived on the scene as a 30-something, preparing to really launch into his teaching ministry on earth, he began by calling into service the disciples. In the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel, we are told that as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew fishing at the sea. He called to them, saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Without hesitation, the brothers dropped their nets and followed Jesus.

Simon Peter and Andrew were among the first to follow Jesus, the other two were James and John, sons of Zebedee. None of the four show any hesitation in their willingness to follow Jesus. They leave behind their families and livelihoods and set off in the footsteps of Jesus. It seems likely that the four might have known Jesus prior to this moment, given their quick response and literal dropping of their jobs, leaving the nets on the shore, and taking off after Jesus. The other eight disciples would join in the gang, but these four spent much more time than the others with Jesus. Perhaps they had known Jesus before, perhaps not – but in any case, some of the other disciples won't join the following for a half year or more. For example, we're not told Matthew joins the following until chapter 9, and Jesus doesn't officially commission the 12 disciples until chapter 10. There's a lot that happens between when Peter begins to follow Jesus and when the full gathering of disciples is formed.

Perhaps it is because Peter spent so much more time than some of the other disciples with Jesus that he has some advanced understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. Peter is the first and only disciple to correctly identify Jesus' divine identity. Just prior to our passage in Matthew 16, Jesus asks the question of the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Christ praises him for his demonstrated knowledge, saying to Peter that you will be the rock upon which the church Christ is built.

Yet, just moments later, as Jesus takes a turn to begin heading toward Jerusalem and the inevitable final week of persecution and crucifixion, Peter seems to struggle with Jesus' Messiahship. Our reading from this morning offers us the first of three times that Jesus tells the disciples that his role as Messiah will end in great suffering at the hands of the temple leaders. As Peter hears Jesus, he is caught off guard. His response to Jesus is one of a person in great shock. He pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!"

Jesus' reaction to Peter shows just how mistaken Peter is. Jesus counters in a fit of seeming anger himself, nearly screaming at Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

From the foundational rock of the church to a stumbling block for the Lord himself, Peter's role as the favored disciple seems to have taken a sharp 180° turn.

How does Peter go from being the favored disciple, the one with the right knowledge, the one with the ability to perfectly identify Jesus as Messiah, to being the one who mistakenly rebukes Jesus? How is it that "the disciple who is blessed and commissioned with grasping the revelation of the Messiah is now rebuked for his objection to Jesus' impending suffering and death"?ⁱ How is it that the disciple who has spent the most time with Jesus, the one who has been there for more of his teachings and healings, the only one who can correctly identify Jesus as the fulfillment of the anticipated Messiah, is also the one who is **so** unable to grasp *what it means* for God to offer redemption and salvation through this Messiah that he calls out and mistakenly rebukes Jesus?

Before we throw Peter under the metaphorical bus, perhaps we should try to understand from where Peter's backlash at Jesus stems. Why is it that Peter so quickly and so vehemently rejects Jesus' claim that his Messiahship would end in suffering?

Perhaps to best understand Peter's rejection of Jesus' claim we should put ourselves in the mindset of a first-century Jewish fisherman. As a first-century Jew, from a lower-income bracket, who probably was unable to read the Hebrew Scriptures for himself, what was Peter's expectation for the coming Messiah? What were the hopes of the Jewish community in the first-century for the work and role of the Messiah?

The Jewish people throughout the Biblical times remembered their history primarily through the tradition of oral storytelling. In a historical era when the population was predominately illiterate, the stories of the people of Israel were passed down from generation to generation as the elders told the stories of years past to the younger generations. The stories of Israel, her deliverance from Egypt, her arrival in the Promised Land, her fortitude and guidance in the years going in and out of exile ... the stories all had two common features: they all had a promise of God's covenant and deliverance, and they all had a central king, prophet, or leader who led them into safety.

The prophets all promised of a future Messiah to come, who would once and for all redeem God's people and who would declare victory for God's covenantal community.

The hope of Peter and the Jewish community of the first-century for a Messiah and Savior probably looked a lot like the hopes of their ancestors before them. They wanted to hold on to God's covenant, and yearned for someone like Moses, David, or Solomon who could lead them out of the oppression of the standing governing and military force that occupied their land. No doubt Peter was expecting a Messiah with a military background who held the capability of leading an army to fight back against the Roman empire who instructed their allegiance and commanded their taxes.

You can only imagine that in hoping for a strong and commanding Messiah, to hear that Jesus, who Peter believed in his heart of hearts was the Messiah, was going to suffer at the hands of the temple leaders, Peter's hopes and dreams were wrecked in the very thought of a suffering Messiah. Peter's thinking must have been that Jesus had it wrong. "This is not the way to turn the world right-side-up. This is not the way to honor the hopes that have kept Jews alive through the most desperate times. Do not squander the hopes of generations on a suicide mission that has no hope of succeeding."ⁱⁱ

Peter's lack of understanding of Jesus' role makes me wonder, did Peter really know what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah? I mean, Peter knows he's yearning for the Messiah. Peter believes that the hopes and fears of the community of Israel have long been waiting for such a title to be fulfilled. But does he really understand what that means, or is he just guessing? When he calls Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is he speaking from a place of divine conviction, or is he playing a philosophical game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, hoping that he can throw down the right guess and Jesus will follow suit.

You throw down Pharaoh? I throw down Moses. ... and I win.

You throw down Goliath? I throw down David. ... and I win.

You throw down Caesar? I throw down the Messiah. ... and I win, right?

Surely Peter was hoping and believing that Jesus as the Messiah meant that Jesus was there to cast out the Romans and liberate the Israelites. But he guessed wrong. "The problem with Peter's expectation is not that it's unreasonable, but that it doesn't change anything."ⁱⁱⁱ If Jesus follows the pattern of being the next king who comes in and overthrows the sitting oppressor by force, it would just be a matter of time before another group built up their might to come in and take over again. If you want to see what this story looks like, just read through the Old Testament scriptures. The story line has been the same for long enough: "Who's in charge may change, but the wheel of force and violence keeps revolving."^{iv}

Now, before we get too righteous up in here, before we go down a road where we are doing nothing but chastising Peter for his lack of understanding, we should pause and acknowledge how we too are complicit in his rebuking of Christ. We have just as hard a time as Peter accepting that suffering is the righteous and desired path when following God's will. And I won't go there right now because I fear I'd never make my way back, but oh, that I would go down the road of talking about how our political elections are nothing short of Peter-ish knee-jerk reaction against suffering. Our votes tend to go *against* any person who seems to indicate that they will *not* rule by force and military precision. ... But I digress, I'll let you make your own connections there today. I digress, for the focus of today's sermon is not about a political leader, it's about the Messiah. Too often, especially here in our country, we seem to confuse those roles. It would do us well to make the distinction between the two.

But we are complicit in Peter's rebuking of Christ. "Like Peter, what we most often want is a little more of what the world already offers – be it force or security or wealth or status or popularity. But Jesus, [as the Messiah,] didn't come to comfort us with a little more, but instead to free us. And freedom first means realizing that we've settled for something that isn't life giving, so that we can hear God's promise of not just more of the same but something different. So that we can hear God's promise of life, a promise that means something only after what we'd previously accepted as life dies."^v

To fully comprehend what it means that Jesus came as the Messiah, we have to stop pushing our own hopes and dreams on the work of the Lord. We have to stop insisting God bless us in the ways we want to be blessed. We have to stop assuming that what it means for the Messiah to come and redeem us, is that through faith in the Messiah we'll gain the prosperity that is defined in earthly terms. I'm sorry to say, Jesus didn't come to make us wealthy or powerful. Yet, perhaps our problem isn't simply that believe Jesus did come for our material benefit. Perhaps the biggest problem is that we continue to tell that lie.

"We are too often confusingly confident with our claims upon God – and more so in our claims on God's behalf. These claims may even come from the same deep love that obviously drives Peter's dispute."^{vi} But one thing we can learn from this text is that when we take the side of Peter, when we become complicit in rejecting the necessity of a Messiah who endures suffering to exhibit the love and will of God, we find ourselves standing beside Peter as he is chastised by Christ, likened even to the evil of Satan. The temptation we have as a people of God is to impose our will – and our views – on God's.

Such a temptation often causes me pause to wonder: how often do we talk of Christ with deep conviction, like that of Peter, in mistaken ways? How often do we throw down the rock on people's scissiors, hoping we have guessed correctly in identifying the Lord or naming God's will? How often do we make statements, either on behalf of our personal convictions, or even from large groups of church leaders, claiming we know the will of God more definitively than all others?

I'm convinced these things happen far too often. So, to help us better know Christ, over the coming month we're going to take a closer look at the one we call Messiah. We're going to be considering the life and teaching of Christ. We're going to see how Jesus' varied identities call us to better live into our call as disciples. We're going work toward better defining who this person Jesus really is, so that, if we ever become too confident in our understanding of Christ, we'll be able to remember the mistake of Peter – we'll be able to own that the first step in failing to identify Christ is to claim we have the definitive understanding of who Christ is and how he exemplifies God's will.

As our passage this morning closes, Jesus says that if we want to save our life, if we want to rejoice in God's glory, if we want to become followers of the way of the Lord, we have to deny ourselves. Like Christ, who will have to carry the cross upon which he will be crucified, we must be willing to take up our own crosses and take the walk that is shameful by the standards of the

world. “Properly understood, [this call to self-denial] calls not for self-effacement but for affirmation of oneself as a child of God. Following Jesus means being ultimately subordinate to God.”^{vii}

So as we begin this focus on better understanding Christ, let us stop playing the guessing game through which we force our perceptions and our desires of a Messiah upon Christ, but hear the good news of God through Christ who professes eternal glory: Jesus is the true witness of kingdom love on earth. Kingdom love, witnessed in Christ, is sacrificial. Kingdom love, witnessed in Christ, looks a lot different than we may predict or desire. Kingdom love, as witnessed in Christ, invites you to join in the self-sacrificial work that promises new life in the wake of death. So let us join together in kingdom love, rejecting the Peterly proclamations of earthly men and women who claim true and infallible knowledge of God, that we may rejoice in the perfect love and the ultimate gift of Christ for all.

ⁱ Dale P. Andrews. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved August 30, 2017.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Dale P. Andrews.

^{vii} Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.