

## ***“I’m Fixed Upon It” – Matthew 16:21-23***

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The wandering heart of Peter is best exemplified—supposedly—in this short text from Matthew 16. We’ve just come off a moment where Peter got it about Jesus. He confessed, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” And Jesus then said he would build his church upon Peter. So Peter, in that moment, was surely his most trusted and faithful disciple.

But now, in just these next couple of verses, Jesus is comparing Peter to Satan. And it comes after Peter protests to Jesus that there’s no way Jesus should undergo the suffering he’s about to endure on the cross.

“Get behind me, Satan,” Jesus exclaims. “You’re setting your mind not on divine things but human things.”

So, one moment, Jesus is building his church upon Peter. And the next, he’s calling him Satan because he once again didn’t get it about who Jesus was and what he had to go through.

I sort of feel sorry for Peter. He really had been doing his best to be faithful. He obeyed Jesus’ command to move his boat out farther in the water where Jesus thought the fish existed. This after he and his disciples, the experienced fishermen that they were, had already been out all night and come up empty.

Peter also attempted to be faithful by walking on water during a storm when he could’ve stayed safely in the boat with the disciples. Yet, Jesus chided him for having too little faith when he started to sink.

And again in last week’s story, in a place where others were worshipping other gods and bringing their sacrifices to these gods, Peter didn’t side with others who said Jesus was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet. He boldly announced that Jesus is the Messiah.

So, if I were Jesus, I’d be cutting Peter some slack for being outraged that Jesus, the Messiah, would have to undergo the suffering that Jesus is revealing. Who could really blame him for protesting how such a Messiah, a Savior, would have to endure such hardship.

And yet, that’s where we are today: Jesus chiding Peter for setting his mind on human things.

We are Peter: we fix our minds on human things too—all the time, frankly. We fix our minds on the divine far too little. Because the divine thing that Peter is guilty of ignoring is so hard to comprehend.

That Jesus the Christ, Jesus our Lord, Jesus our merciful Savior would have to endure what Jesus did on the cross goes against the fundamental belief we humans have about the Divine. After all, God is omnipotent, all-powerful, with the capability and intent to shoot down all forms of evil. That's the Messiah we want and expect—not one that seems to buckle to evil all around us.

Yet, like Peter, Jesus would say to us that we have our eyes fixed upon human things, rather than divine things. We have eyes set on a God who puts down the evil rather than suffers from it.

We don't get it. We'd be chided, too.

Every Lenten season, we journey with Jesus to—the cross. And we know what's going to happen when we arrive at the cross. Jesus is going to die. And despite the lessons we've learned over the years of Jesus' "necessity" of going to the cross, of how he dies for our sins, and sets us free from death, we ask our minds and our hearts every year to reconcile a concept that seems irreconcilable.

And every year—every month, every day really—we bump up with the madness of how an all-powerful God who created everything there is has chosen to succumb to the power of death. And all the time, we need to be reminded that there is a way forward that makes sense and allows us to still believe—to fix our hearts and minds on this too-hard of a concept.

The divine thing we miss is this: God cannot root out evil, but not because God lacks the power. God cannot root out evil because engaging the world in this way would require a different god. A god who used power in this way, in the way we often imagine God should do it, would not be true to God's own character, would not be the God we know in Jesus Christ.

Theologian Tom Long (*What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*) explains it this way: *Whenever we imagine how God, to our way of thinking, should respond to evil, we inevitably project ourselves large. In other words, we think how we would respond to evil, if we had God's great power. If, say, we visit a pediatric oncology ward and see children suffering and dying from cancer, we are moved by their distress and cannot understand how God could allow this suffering. If we were God, we say to ourselves, we would immediately put a stop to this. But we know we are not God, so we cry to God*

*to put a stop to it. In this way, we are pleading for the warrior God to come and destroy this evil at once. We are praying for God to act like we would act if we were God, to display, in other words, power, as human beings define power, in full array, and to destroy without delay what is so clearly an evil. We would do this; so, why doesn't God do it?*

*God is indeed all powerful, but God's power (and this is the divine thing we can't get our minds around, nor could Peter) is not like a raw human power but is instead a love that takes the form of weakness, a power expressed most dramatically on the cross. We think we want God to plunge into creation with a machete and to slash away at evil. It is not that this is somehow out of God's range of power; it is that this kind of use of power is out of God's range of character.*

If God exercised some sort of power option and were to blow through the walls of creation wielding a sword of conventional power and bringing down the hand of divine wrath against evil, then God wouldn't be the God we know in Jesus Christ. God wouldn't be God.

So that begs the question then: Will evil always be present? If God isn't coming in with a machete to clear out evil but instead demonstrates power through weakness, will the scourge of evil ever meet its punishment?

Do you remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds that Jesus told? In it, Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'no; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

The wheat and the weeds had to co-exist. There was no way to root the weeds out without taking out the wheat too. However, at the end of the story, the master says that the reapers will collect the weeds first at harvest and burn them, while the wheat is gathered into the barn.

*This vision of the end of time is that of the loving power of God finally destroying all evil. The ravenous beast of evil, which has soaked history in blood and tears, will be completely eradicated. Every tear will be dried, and death and pain will be no more. (Long)*

In Dachau, Germany, there is a museum of the Holocaust on the grounds of the old Nazi concentration camp. In the museum, there is a photograph so haunting that everyone who sees it, secular or religious, utters a kind of prayer. The photograph is of a mother and her little girl being marched to the gas chamber at Auschwitz. There is not one thing that the mother can do to stop what is happening, so she commits the only act of love she has left. She walks behind her daughter and places her hand over her daughter's eyes, so she will not have to see where she is going.

*Everyone who encounters this terrible photo cries out some version of "O God, do not let this be the last word. Do not let whatever that beast is, in us and history, have the power to tell the final story of this little girl, of these people, or any of us."*

*In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, Jesus is promising us that this evil does not get the last word. Standing at the end of time is the just judge whose righteousness shines like the sun, the risen Christ. Whatever beast mauls its way through history, sending little girls to a cruel death, will be utterly destroyed. (Long)*

The divine thing that we have a hard time fixing our minds and hearts upon (the love of God, seemingly so weak on the cross), ends up victorious and ultimately destroys the power of evil.

When Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," let's hope that Jesus was being gentle in his chiding. Because Peter only wanted victory from his Messiah. Like we all do. He wanted the powers of life and goodness to win out over the powers of death and evil. No, he didn't "get it." What he didn't get was that Jesus' death and resurrection would ultimately bring what he sought. For in Jesus' weakness, there would be ultimate power.

May God help us to fix our eyes upon that.