



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Stickiness of Peter

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 31, 2014

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 16:21-28

There was one time when I was at a party, and I thought I was being served Diet Coke. But instead, after drinking it, I find out that it's regular Coke. Ugh. I haven't drunk that for years. I threw it away. There was another time I was at a reception, and they had bagels. And so I grabbed one and smeared on it a heaping helping of what I thought was cream cheese. But I take a bite, and, ugh, it's butter. Why did it have to be so pale! I threw it away. There was another time I'll never forget a particular meal when I was a child. One morning I poured out some of my favorite cereal, added the milk, and had myself part of a balanced breakfast. Before I start, I look down at my Rice Krispies, and, Lord, it's full of ants. Swimming around, crawling. Ugh. I threw it out and felt awful the whole day.

When we don't get what we expect out of something, isn't that the impulse? Throw it away. Be disgusted. Does this principle hold when we don't get what we expect out of people? I think it does, sometimes. When the friends that we care about don't do what we expect them to do in our time of need. When a politician that we voted for doesn't do what they said they would do. When a celebrity dies in a way you would never expect. When a partner falls short in some way. When a child or a parent goes off the course we had in mind. It's not just about expectations, but something more powerful than that. It's about hope—managing it and knowing how it grows.

We have all these hopes guiding us through the choppy waters like some of the stars of the sky did for sailors of old. Sometimes we have whole constellations of hope to help us navigate this world. And I think every person in this room can remember a time when a star in their constellation moved off course, leading you to waters you never thought you'd have to navigate. Or maybe one of your stars just fell from the sky, leaving a scar of light in the sky and in your heart.

I know it's not a news flash that the world is disappointing. But what I think is oftentimes a news flash for us is that God is disappointing. By that I mean that if we follow God as we know God in Christ, God won't do what we expect or hope. In the Gospels, God won't play to type. God won't live up to all the ancient expectations of God and the divine that still haunt our world. And on a deep, historic level, God will let us down. But this is never the end point. The old hope will be replaced by a new hope. But do we talk enough in the church about the scouring experience that is part and parcel of getting from Hope B to Hope A?

The Gospels are so brisk in pace that they rarely focus on the emotional realities of what is going on in the hearts of people in them. And so it would be a simple matter to miss the deep disappointment that Peter is going through in today's Gospel reading, when his teacher, his leader, his savior starts talking about what is next for him: that Jesus and they must go to Jerusalem. And that there Jesus must undergo great suffering, the kind of suffering that no one would wish on their worst enemy. And then in Jerusalem he will die an ignominious death. And on the third day be raised up by God. But Peter doesn't seem to be interested in that last bit. It makes sense that Peter would be exasperated by this talk. Scared by it. Disappointed in it. Like that bagel I spit out.

It was in last week's Gospel that Peter seemed to be the valedictorian of the disciples by being the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. He wasn't just a reincarnated prophet. He was something new and direct from God. Jesus rewards his insight with a new name, Peter. The Rock. And that Rock/Person will be the foundation of a new movement that has the keys to heaven, will unbind so many from what ails them, and that cannot be defeated by evil. But even though Jesus is extraordinarily encouraging to Peter, he sternly orders them not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. And I can understand why. The kind of salvation that they seek and the kind of salvation that Jesus is offering are so very different. The hope that they have and the hope that Jesus offers talk the same talk (using words

like Messiah, God, and salvation), but don't walk the same walk. And I think this is why Jesus did not want the disciples to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Not because he wasn't the Messiah. But because I think he knew that the kind of Messiah that he was going to be was not the kind that they would be talking about to everyone.

He was right, because once he started mapping out for them what his path was going to look like, maybe to make it easier on them, maybe to get some encouragement, it would be his star pupil who would try to talk him out of it. Because this wasn't how Messiahs behaved. Messiahs don't get incarcerated and tortured. Messiahs don't get killed and publicly humiliated. Messiahs are winners. Not losers. And what Jesus is talking about looks like the personification of losing. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

Jesus uses strong language with Peter. His strongest. "Get behind me, Satan!" And it is here that you wonder if Peter and Jesus' relationship can survive. How long would any friendship last if this were said. Satan means prosecutor or accuser. And Peter has just accused Jesus of being wrong. But I believe Jesus said this, not to stigmatize Peter or cast him out; I think the severity of the language matches how severely tempted Jesus must be at this point. And Peter is tempting him to follow after earthly power and glory in the same way that Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. Because it would be tempting to avoid Jerusalem, to not see God's call through to the end. And to understand it as a response to the concern and love that his friend has for him.

But there is a reality that Jesus is living into that is bigger than his own safety and security. He intends to speak the truth of God and live the truth of God no matter what. Jesus was going to show forth the beauty and wisdom of God even after setting off cultural and political trip wires that would lead to his death. He would risk being misunderstood by everyone. He would risk being accused as a blasphemer. He would risk losing his best friends, like Peter, too. He would go to places, places of horror, where people thought God was absent and show God present and loving and even merciful. He would prove to defeat death by living in and through and beyond it, never dancing to death's grim tune.

But Peter isn't there yet. Peter is disappointed, scared, and maybe even feels lied to. But what fascinates me is that Peter stays. What is it about Peter that has him sticking with Jesus? Even after being called Satan. Even after Jesus goes on to say, "Take up your cross and follow me." Even after his teacher says that to save one's life, you must lose it. Wouldn't that have you running out the door? Instead, Peter would keep following his Lord, sometimes at a distance, sometimes hiding out, but still following. What kept him following?

It is so very important for us to find in ourselves this quality of Peter, this quality he had to stick with Jesus through such twists and turns, to stick with Jesus despite being let down and disappointed, called "Satan." He could have left the band of disciples then and there. He could have gone back to his fishing nets. But he didn't. And it is this "stickiness" that allowed him to find a new hope on the other side of the death of his false hope for earthly glory. His stickiness allowed him to experience a life unbound by death. We all need this stickiness. Because every Christian's path is full of instances where our hope must be corrected and reformed. Our life is never the life we signed up for. We are let down by the falsehood of the world; sometimes we are let down by the truth of the world. But if we stick with it, we can discover that God's hope is always bigger than our first hopes. But getting to that new hope involves weathering times of disappointment. And this demands sticking with God and with the unfolding Truth and with each other through all the changes and chances, sometimes through the collapses of hope and collapses of meaning. It demands holding on for dear life through some of the worst that the world throws our way. And then discovering the life that lives on the other side of it. I'm reminded of the bacteria that they found living even on a satellite in outer space. Behold life's tenacity! This is why it is so important that Peter not say, "God forbid!" to Jesus' path to the cross. This is why it is so important that Peter listens to him when he says, "Take up your cross and follow me," and sticks with Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death. Because the cross that Peter can't stand to think about at first, as ugly and as heartbreaking as it is, the cross in all its countless forms, is not our end. It is our beginning, a beginning that we would never have chosen, but the beginning of a kind of life that truly lasts, a life we call Resurrection.

The first time I took communion, tasted the wine, I thought it burned as it went down. But, luckily, I didn't spit it out. Actually, it was not burning me, but warming me.

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