

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 17 (2026)

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

‘But he turned and said to 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.*”’ In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What are we to make of our fellow disciple, this intrepid Peter? This is the same Peter who, along with his brother Andrew, responded immediately to Jesus' call to leave his fishing business and his way of making a living to follow this itinerant preacher from Galilee to places and with timelines unknown. This is the same Peter who, along with the other disciples and the ever-increasing crowds, traveled the hills and countryside listening to Jesus' teachings about the blessings bestowed upon the poor in spirit, those who mourned, those who were weak, those who served as peacemakers, and those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake. Jesus called Peter and the rest to be like salt and light in a world that needed seasoning and was filled with darkness. Peter was a part of the crowd that followed Jesus and witnessed the miraculous feeding of the hungry in groups of 4,000 and 5,000.

Peter and the disciples had been taught to pray, not judge others, and treat others as they would want to be treated; they had also witnessed firsthand the wonders and miracles of healed bodies and minds of those ravaged by illness and excluded from the wider community. Peter had learned something of the reign of God through Jesus' use of parables. Peter, at least for a moment, was so captivated by Jesus' presence that he found himself walking on water. And then in what appears to be the highlight of his short time with Jesus, he responds with boldness and clarity to the question that Jesus had asked the disciples about his identity: that Jesus “was the Christ, the Son of the living God,” to which Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” A mere seven verses later, Jesus is rebuking his beloved disciple with the words we just heard, “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 Rock to Stumbling Block all within seven short verses. And we know there are more ‘Peter’ stories that follow in the gospels.

Despite all that Peter and his fellow disciples had seen, heard, and experienced directly, they still just didn’t get what Jesus was up to. Their understanding, probably more their hope, was that Jesus marked the arrival of a ‘new day’ in their lives and those of their oppressed brothers and sisters under Roman rule. Yes, they appreciated that Jesus had unfinished business to accomplish in Jerusalem; they nonetheless had no idea what awaited him upon his arrival. So, in this first of four passion pronouncements, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples exactly what the mission entails, and it isn’t anything they expected; they couldn’t believe their ears!

Jesus tells them that he is going to be rebuked and abused by the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised. Forgetting just for a moment the sheer shock of what he is telling them, I suspect none of them heard, and even if they had, clearly would not have understood the last phrase, that on the third day he would be raised. I suspect we can all relate to Peter and his response, that the person he identified as the ‘Son of the living God’ was not, nor could he, be manhandled by the religious and secular ruling elite, let alone killed. Peter’s sense of Jesus’ mission and the success thereof had nothing to do with suffering and death, especially the suffering and death of their Messiah. Peter’s response seems out of love and concern for Jesus, doesn’t it?

Yet here’s the point: the ‘Rock’ had become a tool of darkness, trying to redirect Jesus from *his* appointed mission to one that Peter and the rest of the disciples expected that he came to fulfill, the freeing of the Jewish people from the oppression of the Roman empire, thus Jesus’ stern rebuke of Peter to get his mind off of the things of man and onto the things of God.

So, this obviously begs the question: what are the differences between the thinking of man versus the thinking of God? I ask this being mindful of what the prophet Isaiah wrote regarding the Compassion of the Lord, where he writes, ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.’ Along the

same lines, Paul in his 1st letter to the church in Corinth writes, “For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.”

First off, it is God's *very nature, his essence*, to ‘give himself away.’ God is selfless. God is love, the ultimate desire that seeks out the benefit of the ‘other.’ Conversely, it’s our very *nature* to be self-centered and self-serving. We find ourselves in this predicament because so many spend so much of their time in ‘self-preservation’ mode, focused on whether their needs and wants are being met, rather than on giving and thinking of the needs and wants of others. It’s who we are, but it is a way of thinking that can only be transformed through the grace and mercy of God. When we learn to give our lives away, we come to the recognition that no one can take our lives from us.

To become more like God by increasing our thinking and desire to be selfless, we must deny ourselves. By denying ourselves, we reorient our priorities and relationships away from those that only feed our need to be served, redirecting that energy to others. When I was a kid, my mom used to say when I was not feeling well to “take a shower and then go do something for someone.” She was right. Redirecting my energy away from my pity party of not feeling well and toward seeing what I could do for someone else totally changed my mood and attitude. In moments like these, I began to better understand that it was truly better to give than receive. When we make the effort to redirect the focus of our lives from ourselves to others, we learn what it means to ‘think in the ways of God.’

We complete the circle when we practice the discipline of daily picking up our respective crosses to follow God's ways. The cross, the symbol of victory for Christians and folly for the rest of the world, reminds us that we must truly die to our own self-will and embrace God’s, no matter the cost! Jesus teaches his followers, down through the millennia, that truly following him entails dying to oneself because the life he offers, though challenging and full of mystery at times, is flush with joy, peace, and wholeness. He reminds us that those who want to hold onto their created lives, filled with attitudes of protection and self-preservation, will never learn what it means to ‘live.’ However, if one is willing to

turn their life over to the will and direction of God, that one will find more joy, hope, and a deep sense of shalom than he/she could have ever imagined.

Friends, Peter learned what it meant to 'live' a life for others by denying his own in favor of the one led by God's almighty hand. The 'stumbling block' associated with Satan had become, legend has it, a martyr for the faith. Because he was no longer living for 'himself,' he was free to boldly and confidently go into the proverbial lion's den to proclaim Jesus as the living God. His life held no fear because he knew no one could take his life from him; he was too busy giving it away. We can enjoy the same freedom and live with a deep sense of shalom by following his example and, in doing so, experience life as God intended. Don't we want that? Of course, we do, and it is available for the taking. Put your priorities down and pick God's priorities up.....and anticipate life as you've never lived it!!