

Lectionary 22 Year A 2020
August 30, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our gospel story today is a continuation of last week's reading. Last week, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?", and Peter responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Peter got the right answer, and for that, Jesus blessed him, proclaiming him to be the rock of the church. But like I mentioned last week, it doesn't take long for Peter to mess things up again. As we hear this morning, in fact, it is only four verses after Jesus proclaims blessings for Peter, that we find Jesus rebuking Peter, saying, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block." So, the question is: what happened in these four middle verses to cause this reaction from Jesus?

As I suggested last week, I think it has a lot to do with answering the question, "What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah?" Hopefully you've had a chance to think about what it means for you in this past week. But in today's gospel story we see what happens as the disciples wrestle with this question.

Peter and the disciples have an idea of Jesus' true identity, but it suggests a very different life than they expect. When Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, he is thinking that Jesus would be more like a worldly king who would have powerful armies, victorious battles, abundant riches and a sprawling empire over which Jesus would rule. The disciples must have thought that as soon as people figured out who Jesus truly was, he would be crowned in all his glory, exactly as a king and Messiah should be treated.

But in the four verses after Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus describes a Messiah that is absolutely nothing like what the disciples expect. Jesus begins to explain that God's purpose for him as the Messiah is not to become powerful and mighty, but instead the Messiah, God's only Son, would undergo suffering, be killed, and then be raised from the dead. This was not the vision the disciples had for how you should treat the Messiah, in fact, it was quite the opposite. So, Peter's response seems to make sense: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!"

You see, Peter was a poor fisherman who left his whole life behind to follow Jesus. Now, about the time he was getting things figured out, and was ready for Jesus to become king and save them in the way the world expected—and maybe even give Peter a nice place within the empire—Jesus pulls the rug out from under Peter's feet. In our gospel reading today, Peter gets the harsh reminder that being one of Jesus' disciples isn't at all what he expects.

The disciples might have figured out who Jesus is, but they are still struggling to answer the question, "What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah?" Their answer to that question is nothing like what Jesus was trying to tell them. Our Messiah brings salvation through his death, rather than through military conquest. Our Messiah is one who desires love and justice for *all* people. Our Messiah is one who is humble, who forms relationships with the outcasts of society, and who cares for the poor and the sick. Our Messiah isn't self-centered, focused on gaining power, riches, and respect for himself. Our Messiah is willing to surrender his life to God's call, for the sake of the world.

This is the Messiah that Jesus is trying to help the disciples understand. Jesus' Messiahship is completely opposite everything Peter expected it to be. Jesus' call as Messiah is not the battle cry Peter was looking for. It is not, "Take up your swords and follow me into battle." It is "Take up your cross and follow me to become servants of the world." In this

invitation, Jesus turns our attention not to glory and conquest, but to humility and death. And the crazy thing is that in leading us to the cross of suffering and death, Jesus promises us that we will find life in the very last place we would think to look. We find life in death, death on a cross.

Not only does Jesus explain to us and the disciples that he is a very different kind of Messiah, but Jesus also calls us to a life that is very different from our world's suggestion that the most successful people are the ones with the most power, the most money, or the loudest voices.

We need to ask ourselves not only, "What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah?", but also, "What does it mean to be followers of Christ, the suffering servant?" Our journey as Christians is not a journey to the throne. The Christian journey is not one of fame and fortune. It is not a journey of individual gain, or comfortable living. Our journey as Christians is following Jesus to the cross. It means that we, too, will face suffering and even death on our journey. It means that we will be servants to others, called to set aside our pride and arrogance and take up an attitude of humility so that the *whole* world knows justice, peace, acceptance and love.

Our passage from Romans tells us what this life looks like: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil. ... Love one another...be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. ...Live in harmony with one another.... Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Live peaceably with all.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The Christian life is not an easy journey. Especially in our world today that is so deeply divided and full of hate, and full of people who think they know better than everybody else, living a life of genuine love, humility and servitude is a huge task.

There are so many dehumanizing forces in our culture today. There are systems in place that make some people out to be less than human—whether it is people of color, or people with disabilities, or people from other countries, or people who are unable to put food on the table—our society looks at these people and says that they are not fully human, and that they do not deserve the same respect and basic human decency that white, middle-class, able-bodied, Americans are afforded. Our society says that these people are of less value, and should be ignored, or even worse, feared and killed.

But Jesus calls us as Christians to be servants of *all* people. And we can't do that without humbling ourselves and reaching out to those who have been told by society that they are worthless, expendable, or less than human, and that they should be feared. We are called by Christ to take up our cross, humble ourselves, and live in such a way that we are attentive to the needs of those who do not share the same freedoms and luxuries that we do.

This is what it means to be a Christian. It's is not an easy journey by any means. And plenty of Christians have given up entirely and succumbed to the voices of this world that define success and value differently. But when we hang in there, and we continue in this long and difficult journey to the cross, we will find abundant life. We find life in God's call, not in our own desires. We encounter God and find life not in our own pride, but in humbling ourselves in service. We don't find life in our own expectations or our own faulty assumptions. When we cling to ourselves and our own ideas, we fail to see God's presence. But when we leave all that behind, we experience the life to which God calls us today.

We find life and joy as we serve those in need, as we listen to their cries, as we show them that they are, in fact, worthy of love and respect and justice. We find life as we listen to the voices of people of color crying out for justice. We find life as we feed the hungry and serve the

poor. We find healing and wholeness as we care for those who are sick and injured. We find love and hope as we work for change and transformation in the systems of our society.

This is God's call and purpose for us as Christians. We are called to be servants on a humble journey to the cross. We are called to leave behind our own individualistic aspirations, and turn ourselves toward loving one another and living in community with *all* people. God's call for us is have abundant life, and that means being humble in service, loving those who no one loves, and upholding the virtues Paul writes about in Romans. In this place, in this community of faith, God ensures that we are cared for and comforted, and that we are valued as beloved children of God. And from this place, God nourishes us and sends us out, empowered to follow Christ in carrying God's saving and redeeming power into all the ends of the earth.

It's a big calling, and it's certainly not easy. We'll probably stumble along the way, just like Peter did. But we don't live into this calling alone. We live as followers of Christ, and Christ promises to journey with us. God has sent God's only beloved Son into this world ahead of us not just as our leader or as an example, but as a Savior and Messiah. As one who shows us the way, speaks to us the truth, and ultimately through his death, gives us his life. God has granted us the gift of life through God's son, a life worth living, a life in communion with one another, and in communion with God.

Maybe it's not the life we expected for ourselves, and it's not the life that our society tells us we should want. But this is the life that God gives to each of us. The life that God has promised us, and the life that we are invited to share with one another. What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? It means first and foremost that we are saved—even if that salvation looks nothing like what we would expect. And then, it means being empowered by God through God's call for us. And finally, it means being sent out into the world to share the abundant life that God has given to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.