



# Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

## ***Rock and Stumbling Block Both***

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen

on Matthew 16:13-28 (Exodus 3:1-15)

on Sunday, August 30, 2020 (13<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost)

Those of you from my era or older may remember Jim Marshal of the Minnesota Vikings. He was a great player, one of the “rocks” from those classic Viking teams – the Super Bowl Viking teams. Maybe he was *the rock* of the team. He still holds the NFL record for the greatest number of consecutive starts for an NFL player at 270!

Then there was that infamous game on October 25, 1964, when the Vikings were playing the 49ers. Marshall recovered a fumble, remained on his feet, and began to run for glory. He ran 66 yards into the end zone, threw the ball up in the air in celebration and waited for his teammates to joyfully mob him. Only they didn’t. You see, in the scramble to pick up the fumble, Marshall had become disoriented and ran the wrong way! Oh no. So, he scored a touchdown for the other team.

Well, in our Gospel story today, Peter, the star disciple for team Jesus, ran the wrong way, too. And he received a startling rebuke from Jesus for it. And it’s quite a 180, Peter had *just proclaimed* that Jesus was not just another prophet; Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God! Bravo, Peter! Jesus rewards his insight and perception: “Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock I will build my church,” said Jesus.

So significant is Jesus’ affirmation of Peter that Roman Catholic church structure is based on this verse. You see, the rock on which the church is built is the Pope, Peter being the first. And so, the keys of Peter – the keys to church leadership and authority - are passed on from generation to generation. We Lutherans have a different take on this verse. Something like, “all who confess Jesus as Lord are rocks,” because the power of God is loosed in and through *all of us*.

At any rate, this very upbeat and triumphant conversation between Jesus and Peter then took a turn, didn’t it? The pope stumbled, or should we say, “became a stumbling block.” It began right after Peter’s confession, when Jesus began to show his

disciples where his road would lead: he would undergo great suffering at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders, be killed, and rise again on the third day.

With visions of glory dancing in his head as the head of Jesus' church, Peter had no good way to process what Jesus was now revealing. Sure, there's the rising on the third day, that's pretty cool, but suffering and death? That wasn't a winning formula! So, responding to Jesus' dire predictions, Peter spoke: "This must never happen to you, Lord!"

Now, I have to say, I'm sympathetic with Peter here. I think he's saying, "Hey, I know we're ruffling some feathers in the religious establishment, but if we play our cards right, we can avoid running afoul of the chief priests and the scribes. We can keep winning the people over and crown you king, Jesus."

Perhaps Peter then expected Jesus to say, "I guess you're right, Peter. Maybe I've become too negative about all this. We don't have to give up just yet. Maybe I have to learn how to *avoid controversy* with the chief priests and schmooze better."

But that's not what Jesus says, is it? Jesus says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are a stumbling block to me. You're not on the side of God, but humans."

Whooooaaa! Peter just went from "the rock," to a "stumbling block." He ran the wrong way with this one. But why? What did he say that was so wrong?

Peter was embracing a theology of glory, which means finding success according to the rules of the world. But by compromising the mission, bypassing the cross. Winning, without challenging and dismantling the system that destroys people, the reason Christ came to this earth in the first place. American Christianity is often guilty of such posture. And then if you believe the right things, you will be successful in this world. Especially if you learn how to cozy up to the powers that be, rather than speaking a prophetic voice. If you are suffering, it may be a sign that you're off course.

Jesus, on the other hand, knew full well that suffering and death did not diminish his mission. In fact, it was essential to his mission. And here Peter was tempting Jesus to save his own skin, to run the wrong way. Jesus knew that if he remained true to his calling, to bear witness to the kingdom of God in his own person, he must not recalculate and alter his course in order to protect his own hide.

This is similar to the temptation that Jesus experienced in the wilderness a few years earlier, where Satan tempted Jesus to use his miraculous powers to his own advantage, to advance himself. But that's not the way Jesus rolls. Jesus uses his powers to give life, to bring healing, to create hope in people – especially people who don't matter to the world. But empowering people who aren't supposed to be empowered brings retribution from the “powers that be,” from the chief priests and the scribes. That's what the cross means. It means not avoiding the retribution for doing the right thing - the loving thing - with the promise that suffering is redeemed and love wins in the long haul. The cross. Dying and rising. The rhythm of God's kingdom that does not work like the world does. But it dismantles the power of sin and death.

Or...Jesus could take the easy way and play by the world's rules of self-preservation.

So, Jesus heard Satan speaking through Peter and called out Satan. “Get behind me, Satan.” It's interesting to note here, though, that while Jesus rebuked Peter, he did not reject him. Get behind me, Satan? Well, Satan's not going to get behind Jesus, but a follower would. Jesus was saying to Peter, “Stop trying to orchestrate my path. Take your proper place *behind me* as a disciple!”

Jesus does not reject Peter, though he has ample reason to, on more than one occasion. But that's what God does: he works with flawed human beings, asking only that we be *willing*.

It's not unlike our Old Testament story about Moses and the burning bush that Janell shared with us earlier. Unlike Peter, who is filled with self-confidence and boldness, Moses is reluctant when God asks him to lead. Moses has a million and one excuses why he is not the best one to lead his people out of bondage. For instance, Moses points out, he was not eloquent. He wouldn't know what to say. In fact, it is believed by many scholars, that Moses was a stutterer.

And yet, God told Moses, “Don't worry. I will put the words in your mouth that you must speak. I will be with you.” In other words, God could work with someone as imperfect as Moses, because this story is all about God, not our shortcomings.

God could work with Peter, who was very different than Moses, but for the same reasons. God knows how to work through imperfect mediums!

Luther had this way of putting it: every Christian is simultaneously justified (forgiven) yet sinful at the same time. All of us are *a rock and a stumbling block at that same time!*

Jesus lays out the cost of discipleship, the cost of following him: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This is a pretty high bar! Pick up your cross and follow Jesus. Is it any wonder we are often a stumbling block? Much of the time, this is not how we live, but rather we seek our own self-interest. We avoid conflict. It is a touch of grace in this passage that Jesus forgives Peter, and us, and then invites us to get behind him. Follow him. Are we good enough to do this? To pick up our cross and follow? No. We are not. But we are not alone. We follow the example of Jesus, but Jesus himself, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is actually with us, picking us up, bearing us up, working through us.

So, get out there in the world and lose your life for Jesus' sake! Share Good News to the broken hearted, advocate for the oppressed, challenge the systems that diminish human lives. But if you do so, in this world, you will suffer, but that's part of our story.

I close with reference to a high school teacher in Los Angeles who has picked up her cross. She had the audacity to wear a shirt with the quote, "I can't breathe," on it. This is a reference to the plight of African Americans who are often suffocated by a system in figurative, and sometimes literal ways. "I can't breathe," are words uttered by black men apprehended by police who are overstepping their duties. The teacher who wore this shirt is reminding us all of our responsibility to seek justice for the marginalized. That is what Jesus did, consistently, by the way.

Well, it seems that there are more than a few guardians of the status quo who have taken offense to her wearing a t-shirt like this. Because of numerous death threats, this teacher has had to move out of her house for her own safety.

Because she wants to give voice to those in our world who are suffocated.

May God be with her and give her strength as she suffers. May God help us all to have the courage to carry our cross when called upon. Amen.