

13th Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn August 29-30, 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

When I worked at camp, we didn't usually have formal paths for our hiking. Instead, the counselors just learned to follow landmarks through the woods to stay in the most open areas to lead the campers to the final location. Usually these landmarks were giant rocks. You would turn left at the first rock, and then go straight past the mossy rock, but turn right at the rock with the giant crack in it...

I didn't think of it at the time, but after the fact, I did stop to wonder what we would have done if anyone had ever moved those rocks, or if they had ever fallen down the hill. I, at least, would have gotten lost pretty quickly without those rocks pointing the way forward.

Last week, we heard Jesus tell Simon Peter that Peter is "the rock on which [Jesus] will build the church." It's a play on words because Peter's name in Greek, *Petros*, means "rock." Peter's bold faith and trust in Jesus will be foundational for later believers.

And this week, following immediately on the heels of the conversation last week, Jesus will make a new play on Peter's name: not the foundational rock, but the stumbling block. It was Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the messiah that had so impressed Jesus, but it's clear this week that Peter didn't have any more idea of what "messiah" meant than any of the others.

We take it for granted, I think: knowing what Jesus' ministry will entail. But the people around him had no idea. We go back, and we see clues throughout the Old Testament; we see God saying that God is the one who sacrifices God's own self for us, but we are reading all of that through the lens of Jesus on the cross. We have that hindsight helping us. The disciples? Sure, God is the one who sacrifices for us, but to sacrifice that much?

And if we're honest, it's often hard for us to comprehend too, even with the benefit of hindsight. It's so much easier to say that God only loves us if we... Act the right way. Look the right way. Believe the right way. Are born into the right family or socioeconomic class. Work hard enough to get out of our troubles. Meet in the right place. It's so much easier to understand a God who loves conditionally, rather than a God who is truly with us *always*.

Peter's bold declaration is, I suspect, what the other disciples were thinking. No, Jesus, you will never be executed or suffer. Wouldn't that ruin everything? Wouldn't it ruin everything if God saves us *through* death? Wouldn't it ruin everything if we don't have to earn God's love or salvation?

I've told you before that the Greek word for belief, *pistis*, is less about ideas than it is about the action of trusting. To trust that God's ways are better than ours, even when it really looks like God's ways would ruin everything... That's a hard thing. It's a thing that Peter struggled with. It's a thing that the other disciples struggled with. We confess at the beginning of our worship services that it's a thing Jesus' disciples continue to struggle with today. We are still both rocks that point the way and stumbling blocks to ourselves and others. The same things that are so much a part of our faith: study, time alone, time together, care for others, places: all these that are so good, we can and do turn them into stumbling blocks. Any time we do not use them to point to Christ's death and resurrection, to God revealed in Jesus on the cross, we risk making them stumbling blocks. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. But we also hear the word of forgiveness at the beginning of each worship service.

Our baptismal calling is not to live into that trust in order to earn anything. Our baptismal calling is to live into that trust out of love and awe. To be the body of Christ, to show God's love to a world that so desperately needs to hear it is loved. Not because that will earn us anything. But simply because God loves it, and the world needs to hear that.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing and phone options. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We will be making a Salem and Zion Advent devotional, with a reflection each day from members of the congregation. If you are interested in more information about how you can participate in writing a reflection or if you are interested in receiving the completed devotional, call our offices or contact Pr. Nicole with any questions!

Peace be with you.