

The Gospel - Matthew 16:21-28

Scandalous!

Jesus says to Peter "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me". How the mighty have fallen. Peter was such a good student in last week's gospel. Remember? He got the teacher's pet award for calling Jesus "the Messiah, the son of the living God" early in Chapter 16. He even got the keys to the kingdom. But now Peter is Satan and a stumbling block.

Let's start with the stumbling block

The noun skandalon, σκάνδαλον, means literally "to trip somebody up". Skandalon shows up 15 times in the bible and the verb form appears 29 times. It's a well used word. The modern word scandal is the great great grandchild of skandalon. Paul uses skandalon to remind believers not to trip up others by their foolish behavior. If you really want to nerd out, go here for all the references - http://girardianlectionary.net/res/skandalon_nt.htm

Skandalon paints a picture of a loose rock on the road that you trip over. A skandalon for me is lego's. In the pre-school years with my kids, I wanted to yell out words far worse than scandal when those Satanic edges dug into my feet. So, Peter is 'tripping up' Jesus. Jesus has not stopped loving Peter. Jesus did, however, use some very intense language like Satan and stumbling block to remind Peter (and us) that there is only one person in charge.

And now Satan

The accuser! I think accuser is a better translation for us than Satan. The pitch fork guy with the tail – you can blame Hieronymous Bosch (1450-1516). Biblically, devilish words often mean something like opposing legal council more than a red guy goading sinners with a pitch fork. The devil, lucifer, Satan, the snake almost always show up to contradict God's will. If you think of Satan as one who contradicts / gets in the way of God's will, then Peter can easily be Satan. Personally, I know it's not fashionable, but I do believe there is a big Satan. I believe there is a force – person or not – bent on contradicting the will of God. You can just pat me on the head for that one.

Following Jesus and the cross

The last paragraph of today's Gospel.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

My fellow stumbling blocks, contradictors, and accusers, we find our balance and purpose in the cross. The cross strips away our conceits and the cross is a vision to lead us.

The cross and denying yourself

For those of you who think you are nearly perfect and wonderful, Matthew 16 is for you - take up the cross. Yet I know that some of you have only known loss and suffering. Don't hear Matthew 16 as adding insult to injury. For you, you who are beaten down – here's another scripture to balance Matthew 16. It's Ezekiel 16:6-7. This prophetic text is part of a long story that Ezekiel tells.

It's a story of Israel being restored. It is a little gross, but imagine an abandoned baby in a pool of blood. This baby is noticed, taken in, and cared for by a traveler. The traveler – God - picks up the baby, which is Israel. God says, *Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, "Live!". I made you grow like a plant of the field.*

Live - that might be the hardest thing you can imagine, but it is the call of Jesus to you. You are meant to thrive in the Lord. Some of us need to die to ourselves and take up the cross and follow. Others of us, no less valid, need to live because of the cross. If you are chronically down on yourself, the Lord says "live!", the cross is ahead of you and leading you home. Wherever you are, up or down, Jesus is here.