

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Today's Gospel reading is a continuation of last week's account of Peter's famous confession of faith, acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. That confession was followed by Jesus telling Peter that he would build his church on the rock of Peter's faith and give Peter the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. If we stopped there, we might come away with the idea that Jesus' declaration would simply come true and the church would live happily ever after. We could inscribe Jesus' words on our churches and take heart in knowing that Peter's right answer to the question of Jesus' identity is our right answer too, and we could rest secure in our identity as the true church. But to stop there would be to miss the remarkable reversal that happens in this second half of the story that we get in today's reading, and to therefore miss something crucially important about the nature of the church and our lives of faith, something important that has been true from the very founding of the church until now.

As I said last week, Peter may have gotten the right answer to Jesus' question, that he was indeed the Messiah. But what comes next shows that he didn't understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. You know how you can do well on a test because you're a good test taker, but still not really have mastered the material? This is kind of like that. Sort of. But this isn't just not knowing enough information. It's having the completely wrong idea. This is like when I was starting to read longer books as a child, books like the Hardy Boys mysteries, and somehow got it into my head that the word "reluctant" meant "eager" – the exact opposite of its actual meaning. Right after Jesus rejoices over Peter's confession and then tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah, he starts to tell them that he has to go to Jerusalem to suffer and be put to death at the hands of the religious establishment. And so Peter speaks up again. "No way! This can't be!" "God forbid it," is what our translations says, but it's more like "God save you from such a fate!" Going to Jerusalem to suffer and die seems to Peter to be the opposite of what the Messiah would do. In his understanding, the Messiah is the anointed king, who is supposed to conquer Jerusalem the way King David did, not be arrested and executed. And everybody else would have thought the same way as Peter.

So, what Jesus says in response is particularly startling. "Get behind me, Satan!" What? *Satan*? Really? Did Peter deserve *that*? It seems harsh and out of nowhere. All Peter was doing was showing concern for Jesus. Quite sensibly, he did not want his teacher and friend to come to harm. It is how any of us would react to someone we cared about making the announcement Jesus made. And that is precisely why we need to come to grips with Jesus' response and hear ourselves called out by Jesus together with Peter. This is not the first time Jesus called someone Satan in Matthew's Gospel. He did it already once before when the devil came to tempt him in the wilderness after his baptism, right after God spoke from the heavens and declare Jesus to be God's son. Jesus had gone to the wilderness to fast, to deprive himself of food as an exercise in resisting temptation. And the devil came to try to get him to give in. "Go ahead, make some bread out of these stones. You can do it. You're the Son of God, right?" But it's after the last temptation, when the devil says he can give Jesus all the nations of the world if he would only fall down and worship him, that Jesus says, "Go away, Satan!" Satan is a title that means "adversary" or "accuser." Jesus calls the devil Satan because he is trying to use that conventional understanding of what it means for Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God. He's tempting Jesus to be a conquering hero. "Don't suffer, use your divine power!" Jesus calls Peter Satan because he

is effectively doing the same thing as the devil. Ironically, what Peter is expecting Jesus to be as the Messiah is exactly what the devil tempts him with in the wilderness. Peter has just declared Jesus to be the Messiah and Son of God and now he is being an adversary, using those titles the same way the devil did to try to stop his mission. And that's what Jesus is getting at by calling him a "hindrance." The word at its root means "trap." Jesus is saying that Peter is trying to trap him in the devil's game.

But there is also an important difference between Jesus' reaction to the devil and to Peter. To the devil he merely says, "go," meaning "go away." For Peter, though, he adds two words: "behind me." "Go behind me. Get back in line. Stop trying to lead me in the wrong direction and get back to following." And if you really want to follow me, Jesus says, you have to go where I am leading. And where I am leading is to the cross. I go to face sin and suffering and death head on. I will endure the worst they can do, and by doing so will undo their ultimate power. I will end the reign of sin, death, and evil and will blaze a trail straight through the midst of them to new, abundant, and everlasting life.

The picture of discipleship that emerges from Jesus' confrontation with Peter is complicated, and more difficult than we want or expect. It is both "blessed are you" and "get behind me, Satan!" at the same time. Jesus does indeed build the church on the likes of Peter, and Peter isn't even done yet getting things wrong at this point in the story. There is a tough road still ahead for Peter. He will give into his fear and deny that he even knows Jesus. And then, even after Jesus' resurrection, according to the book of Acts, Peter will still struggle to appreciate what God is doing in building the church, that God intends to include people who Peter had always thought were excluded from God's love and care.

Taking this story to heart can help us be realistic about the church in our time and steer us away from false assumptions about who Jesus is and who we are. Peter's divinely inspired confession that Jesus promised to build the church on comes out of the mouth of someone who is still caught up in the ways of this world, ways that are oppose to God and lead away from God's love for us and for the world. Yet Jesus does not give up on him, even while calling him Satan. And that is the truly remarkable thing about the church. It is made up of those who are both saints and sinners at the same time, fully both, just like Peter. As I said last week, quoting Martin Luther, what makes saints saints is not what they do for God, but what God does for them. If we can come to grips with this dual reality, we should be able to be more clear-eyed about ourselves as the church, more able to recognize that despite our best intentions we will tend to default to the ways of this world. We will favor common sense and safety and security at the expense of pouring out our lives for the sake of others. And the painful truth is that we cannot run an institution and not be faced with these contradictions.

Four years ago, Helen and I visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, a giant church built over the supposed burial place of Peter. Around the base of the inside of the central dome is inscribed Jesus' words to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven." But to be realistic about the church, I think there should be another inscription up there with it. "Get behind me, Satan, you are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Jesus said both of those things to Peter. Both are true. And they are also true of us. We need to be reminded of both, to live in the tension between them, and to trust that Jesus is leading us in the midst of our contradictions to a new and better future. That is our hope, and our joy. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.