

Lectionary 22 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 3, 2017

Matthew 16:21-28

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

Dear Friends:

There is a scene on Easter morning— according to John’s gospel— there is a scene on Easter morning when Peter and John are running toward the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene had reported that the tomb was empty. Peter and John are running to the tomb. John gets there first. But Peter goes inside first. And the story— which is named for John, after all— tells us that Peter saw; but that John saw AND BELIEVED.

That scene is a great example of Peter; it is so TYPICAL of Peter. Peter is always eager to jump in— to be the first one to jump in— we heard three weeks ago about how he jumped overboard to walk on water with Jesus. Peter always jumps in, and doesn’t entirely understand what he has gotten himself into. Peter is rash. *“I will never deny you!”* Peter said, at the Last Supper. But when things get tough, Peter tends to wimp out.

So Peter gets mixed reviews in the New Testament. By just about everyone. John’s Gospel tends to make fun of Peter with a droll sense of humor. The Apostle Paul bellows in anger about Peter in the Letter to the Galatians. [Despite the fact that] After Jesus’ work was finished, Peter emerged as the key leader of Christianity— which is part of why so many New Testament writers felt compelled to comment about him. There are undeniably some good things about him, and some bad things about him...

...Including this frosty exchange between Jesus and Peter in today’s gospel reading when Jesus exclaims: *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* A famous event. So famous that we’ll hear Mark’s version of this story at the end of February, during the 2018 season of Lent. Peter has once again rushed in. If you were here last Sunday, you heard how he— Peter— was the first to recognize who Jesus really is. And at that moment, Peter was blessed by Jesus. *“On this rock, I will build my church.”*

But in today’s gospel reading, Peter has rushed in, and jumped into the deep water, identifying Jesus but failing to understand the implications. There IS a new way in Jesus, but in Jesus we learn to sacrifice ourselves. We learn the cost of discipleship. We learn that this is not an easy road. *“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”* Jesus has been straightforward about this all along. He said it back in the Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the*

kingdom of heaven. We heard these words back on January 29. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Peter had heard those words months earlier. *We've heard those words, months ago. But it's tough to live those words. It's difficult to trust Jesus, and to trust God, when we lose ground; when doing the right thing costs us something.*

The writer of today's gospel— Matthew— has carefully presented Peter's predicament in direct connection to something called "the church." If you were here last Sunday, you may remember that I said that Matthew— alone among the four gospel-writers— Matthew is the only one who uses the word "church." "*On this rock, I will build my church.*" Those are words that occur only in Matthew. Matthew connects Peter and church in a significant way. Peter's choices are the church's choices. Peter's likely mistakes are the church's likely mistakes. Peter's victories are the church's victories.

"Church" is a particular word in the New Testament. It is used only in Matthew among the four gospels, and only carefully in Matthew. The word has to be understood in its Greek meaning. And in its relationship to Hebrew vocabulary. The word *ekklesia*, from which we get the word *ecclesiastical*, in Greek means literally "called out." It's the Mediterranean word for citizens called out to a town assembly. *Ekklesia* is a very civic word. *Ekklesia* is public. The "called out" assembly. Called out of our homes, called out of our private lives, and into the public realm.

Ekklesia is the Greek word used to translate the Old Testament word, the Hebrew word, *qahal*. Which means assembly, company, congregation, or convocation. In the Old Testament, it has this sense of being the people that God has gathered, and that God has bonded with in a covenant.

What I want you to understand is that there are believers, there are communities, there are good people. There is spirituality, there is prayer, there is love. God's activity pervades and saturates the whole creation. But the Church is the *identified* body, the identified agency of God. The Church is the public expression of Christ and Christianity. Which is a great responsibility and a great duty.

I am a taxpayer, and a voter, and a citizen who obeys and upholds the law. But a police officer is the public expression of the law and the voters and the taxpayers. The uniformed police officer is the body and the agency of a society that lives by law. So the police officer in uniform must behave in a way that reflects that responsibility and that duty.

Now the New Testament has a lot of words to describe Christians. The *hagion*, which means the saints. The *adelphos*, which means the brothers and sisters. The *koinonia*, which means the fellowship or the communion. The *plethos*, which is just the multitude or the crowd or the mob.

The *mathetai*, which means followers, usually translated as “disciples.” And even *Christians*, which on some literal level means anointed ones.

So the Bible has a lot of words to describe the people in this room. But one of those words—*ekklesia*, church— means the designated agency, the uniformed body, the public expression. And like the uniformed police officer, with that role comes great responsibility and great duty.

What I want you to see today is that this episode with Peter this morning is the second of four consecutive Sunday gospel readings from Matthew that pertain to being church. Because the Church has authority. Which a lot of people— a lot of Christians— want to deny. And with that authority comes responsibility and duty and accountability. And in this four-week sequence, the first Sunday— last Sunday— was the giving of authority. But then we get the checks and balances that will assure responsible use of authority. Today, Jesus reverses what he said to Peter last week. Because whenever Peter— and by extension, the Church— seeks worldly power then it betrays the Son of the Living God and becomes satanic.

Matthew’s gospel is the New Testament book most concerned with the abuse of religious authority. And we are in the year of Matthew. If you want to see the definitive critique of the abuse of religious authority it is in Matthew chapter 23. It is Jesus speaking against the Pharisees, but the Pharisees could just as easily be Christian church leaders. In fact, I saw some of them on television this week. I wondered, why don’t I ever get to preach on Matthew 23. Well, it is assigned to the Sunday that we always observe All Saints’. Maybe this year I’ll move it to an adjacent Sunday. But go read it, if you can. It’s absolutely brilliant. Matthew chapter 23.

When our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, became bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, she asserted that it was time for us to focus on our identity because we do not have the resources and time to pretend to be all things to all people. And she gave us these four statements to reflect upon:

- (1) We are church.
- (2) We are Lutheran.
- (3) We are church together.
- (4) And we are church for the sake of the world.

We are church. For Bishop Eaton, that clarifies that we are not a business, we are not a charity like United Way, we are not a political party, we are not a bridge club, we are not a country club. We are church. When I reflect upon those words, as I have attempted to do with you this morning, I think of the unique meaning of that word, *ekklesia*. That we are the public expression, the designated agency, the uniformed body, that has been granted special authority by Christ. And that we cannot shirk that authority. But nor can we tolerate the abuse of religious authority. Even in someone as venerable as Saint Peter. Amen.