

The Master Builder
A Sermon on Matthew 16:15-28 by the Rev. Philip Major
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This summer I've spent several days building a retaining wall out of large rocks in my backyard. I find this to be a strangely satisfying task. Most of the rocks are very large. Some days I have accomplished my goal if I have moved three or four rocks into the right places. When I move rocks into the right places, the wall is strong and stable and I can walk on top of it and plant trees on the slope behind it.

I have noticed that none of the rocks are perfect. Some of them have two sides that are fairly flat, but many of them are like this rock I brought this morning. This rock has one face that is smooth and flat, and the rest of it is a combination of curves and bumps and hollowed out places. I keep looking for the right place for this rock, but I haven't found it yet.

The same thing is true for you and me and all of us who consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus. We are all quite imperfect. We all have our rough, bizarrely shaped places in our approaches to life. We make plenty of mistakes. We sometimes do the wrong things. We sometimes say the wrong things.

This is one of the main ideas of our story from the Gospel of Matthew. I added some extra verses from last week's passage to help us understand the meaning of today's passage. We can't really understand the meaning of these verses from the end of chapter 16 if we aren't remembering the verses from the middle of the chapter. In this way, Matthew is like a novel. In a way that is slightly different from John, Luke, and Mark, the themes in the Gospel of Matthew are woven together like a novel. John is like poetry, Mark is like a story told around the campfire, Luke is like history, and Matthew is like a novel.

One of the themes of Matthew is that God builds the church out of us, even though each one of us is quite imperfect. In today's passage we see Peter making one of the most common, most egregious mistakes, yet Peter will end up being the leader of the church of Christ followers in Jerusalem after Jesus' death and resurrection.

In last week's Gospel passage we heard Jesus ask his disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."*

Peter must have been feeling pretty good at this point in the story. It's like Jesus has given him the biggest promotion of all time. But Peter is no different from the rest of us. Peter is like this rock, bizarrely shaped, with many imperfections.

Our passage continues, *From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.* Let's consider two things about what Jesus has said.

First, Jesus is choosing to go into a situation where he will suffer. This is different from poor people suffering because they don't have food or a place to stay. This is different from children or spouses suffering because of domestic abuse. That kind of suffering is senseless. It is not God's will for children to suffer abuse at the hands of their parents, or for those who are poor or sick to suffer. Jesus' suffering is different because he has the power to choose to go to a situation where he will suffer, because there is work that he is doing to accomplish what God intends.

Second let's notice that Jerusalem is a dangerous place for Jesus. Jerusalem is a dangerous place for Jesus, because the main conflict in the story is the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, and the religious authorities are located in Jerusalem. Jesus needs to accomplish his task, so he has decided he must go there. Jesus does have a choice in the matter, but for him there is only one option worth considering.

It's like Martin Luther King returning to the South, to Alabama when he was finished with seminary. Martin Luther King was born, attended school and college in Atlanta, Georgia. As he prepared to serve as an ordained minister he attended Crozier Seminary in Pennsylvania and then received his doctorate at Boston University in 1955. It would have been easy for him to find a church to serve in the North. But Martin Luther King would not consider staying in the North, where he and his family would be safe and life would be very comfortable.

It was the same way for Jesus. He would not consider staying in a safer, more comfortable place. Jesus would go to Jerusalem, even though this would bring him face to face with the people who really hated him: the religious authorities. We're talking about the priests and bishops and other well-dressed, well-educated people who were part of the religious establishment. The members of the religious establishment, the priests and bishops and scholars, were the ones who made sure that Jesus would suffer, that he would be put on trial with false charges brought against him, and that he would be put to death.

Jesus told the disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem, even though he knew something like this would happen to him. So we can understand, at least a little bit, when *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."* Peter's words are invoking God's actions, but invoking God's name doesn't make it right.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why Jesus responds so strongly. Jesus *turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling stone to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

Let's notice three things. First, Peter, the rock on which the church in Jerusalem will be built, is acting like a stumbling stone in this part of the story. Second, let's notice that Jesus' words to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" are nearly identical to what Jesus said to the devil, back in chapter four of Matthew, where he said, "Away with you, Satan!" But the difference is important; Jesus is telling Peter to follow him.

Let's also notice that this argument between Jesus and Peter is not a personal argument; it's a theological argument. Like many Christians today, Peter seems to think that salvation can be accomplished without any chance of us having to be uncomfortable, without any chance of us losing something or having to give up something.

Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow what I am actually doing. For those who want to save their life will lose their true selves,, and those who lose their life for my sake will find their true life."

It's not a personal argument; it's an argument about what is the way of salvation. The way of salvation is not the way of selfishness, or the path of wealth and riches. The way of salvation is not the path where we follow a secret, mystical program or a secret recipe that makes life perfect and comfortable.

There is nothing secret about the way of salvation; the way of salvation is elusive to us only because people don't want to follow it. The way of salvation is the path where we are willing to give up something for the sake of others. The way of salvation means we have to endure some amount of suffering. It's not that the suffering is good; we have to endure some amount of suffering in order to do the work of God's kingdom, which is to share some of God's love with other people.

The sanitation worker leaves the house at 5 a.m. while everyone else is still asleep, in order to keep the city clean and to keep health hazards from spreading. The teacher endures long evenings grading exams to help their students learn how to learn. The soldier endures injuries or weeks sleeping on the ground to bring a measure of stability and peace to a nation torn apart by war. The Samaritan Center volunteer gets out of bed at 5:30 and skips breakfast in order to serve breakfast to 200 people at the Samaritan Center. The parent endures the loss of time with friends to bring their child to a friend's house for a play date.

These actions are not always regarded as heroic, but this is the path we are called to follow. We know we are getting behind Christ, and following his example, when we choose to give up something for the sake of sharing God's love with God's people. We also know we will always be quite imperfect, just like Peter. But God doesn't need or expect us to be perfect.

We often make big mistakes, even as we work together in the church, even as we are trying to do the right thing together. Yet God takes all of us and uses us to build the church and do God's work in the world, which is caring for the people. God is able to build something strong and effective out of us, even though each one of us is kind of like this rock, bizarrely shaped, with many imperfections.

Sometimes we feel we don't fit in anywhere. We need to be patient with each other and with ourselves, for the many imperfect, bizarrely shaped features we carry around with us. None of us are perfect. God will find the right place for each one of us in God's work.

We need to be patient and we need to trust. We need to trust that God will find the right place for us and the right place for that other person we really care about. Much as I like to build stone walls, we're not the real builders. God is the master builder and we are pretty much like the stones. We can't fix it for the other people; we can't even fix life for ourselves. We need to let God move us into that right spot, where we, with all our imperfections, contribute to God's beautiful work of love.