



Peter: A Person Like Us

TEXT
Matthew 16:13–23

August 4, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Brandon Frick

A couple of weeks ago, I told my oldest son, Nathan, that I was going to be preaching on the screens at Antioch this week like Pastor Tom does. He said, “Does that mean you’re going to be funny?”

I said, “You think Pastor Tom’s funny, bud?”

He said, “Yeah! Well ... adult funny.” So, I’m feeling the pressure, and tomorrow’s his birthday, so I’m starting off this sermon with what I hope will be an adult funny joke.

A Presbyterian and a Baptist end up outside the Pearly Gates at exactly the same moment. Standing in front of them is none other than St. Peter, with his keys to the gates dangling off his hip. He calls the Presbyterian up first, looks him up and down, and then says, “Good news! You’re in!” Trumpets start playing, St. Peter opens the gate. Gold confetti starts raining down, and a red carpet rolls out in front of the Presbyterian, leading him to his mansion in the clouds.

Seeing all this, the Baptist gets excited for her turn. After several minutes pass, she sees a small door beside the gate open, and out pops St. Peter waving her forward. She’s a little nervous,

wondering what it means that she’s not going through the main gate. She gets over to St. Peter, and finally just blurts out, “St. Peter, did I do something wrong? This must be a mistake!”

St. Peter responds, “Oh no, in fact you did just about everything right, but do you know how long it’s been since we had a Presbyterian up here?”

I’ve heard that joke at least half a dozen times, and every time, the pairings change. It could be a Methodist and an Episcopalian, or a Franciscan and a Jesuit. It’s your pick really because all these characters are interchangeable — except one: St. Peter. He’s always the one standing on our side of the gate. In the modern imagination, this is his one and only job for eternity: heaven’s doorman.

So, people usually regard him in one of two ways: a cartoon figure working for the Big Guy or a foreboding Keeper of the Keys deciding your eternal fate.

Neither of these depictions is accurate or helpful, because they take a mortal person and turn him into either a goofy bit character or a god. All those do is distance us from someone who’s a lot like us — people who some days find following Christ to be a pretty natural and rewarding thing, but

on other days, come up short — and I don’t mean by a little bit. Some days it’s golden confetti, and others we’re sneaking in the side door.

Our reading for today shows us briefly how these two realities played out in Peter’s life. One day he wins Jesus’ little trivia game about who he is — the Messiah — and then gets a resounding “attaboy” for having received this revelation from the Father. Jesus makes him the rock upon which the church will be built, and because he’s so receptive to God’s wisdom, his decisions will be in perfect alignment with God’s decisions. Peter, the Rock, is having a *great* day.

But just a few days later, the Rock gets rocked! Peter decided he should try and talk Jesus out of walking a path that would lead to his crucifixion, but also fulfill his ministry, and Jesus is not pleased. Jesus rebukes Peter for trading away divine wisdom for earthly nonsense. He tells him to get behind him, and calls him “Satan”! There’s no fudging the translation here; the Greek is *Satana*. The Rock has turned into the Devil.

Peter is holding on for dear life to a pendulum that swings between getting it really right or getting it really wrong. I get

the sense that the gospel writer intentionally sets up these two accounts right up against each other, so that we might see Peter in this light. He is *both* the foundation of the church and the one who always threatens to tear it down. He is *both* the one who reflects God's own wisdom, and — maybe out of fear or a desire to control Jesus' life, or something else altogether — is the one who tries to get Jesus to abandon the path that leads to the cross, and eventually the empty tomb.

Now Peter's story is extreme, but I'm guessing all of us have had really great moments in our faith journeys, coupled with not-so-great ones. Moments when, like kids on the diving board, we're calling out, "Watch me, God!" and others where we're hiding under our towel after the lifeguard kicked us out for rough play.

Ten years ago, when I was a grad student, I had a paper accepted for presentation at a conference in St. Andrews, Scotland. Aaryn and I decided to make a trip out of it, and had family join us. So, while they went on daily adventures in the area, I was at the conference all day. And I was happier than a pig in mud. The room was filled with eager grad students like me, and we got to rub elbows with world-renowned scholars.

Ten years later, thinking about a bunch of 20-somethings getting star-struck by people who had typed hundreds of pages of technical, esoteric writings is *hysterical*. And nerdy ... I mean really, really nerdy. Like Star Trek conventions, dad jokes and

pocket protectors all stuffed in one neon green fanny pack nerdy. And I was in heaven!

You know, not to brag, but a couple of those world-renowned scholars even said that my paper was, and I quote, "not bad." And they were right. It was so "not bad" that they published that short paper, aimed at getting Christians to take care of the natural world, in a book alongside all those big dog scholars. I was proud of how hard I worked, my motivation in writing it, and how it turned out. But as is so often the case, "proud" turned into prideful.

When we left St. Andrews heading west, we stuffed our things in the trunk, and my over-inflated head in the backseat, and as we rolled through the green Scottish countryside, I was basking in my glory and planning out my impending ascendancy. We made our way by car and ferry to the island of Iona off Scotland's west coast.

This tiny island — about three square miles — was the island from which St. Columba launched his mission to Great Britain. It has about 150 year-round residents, a golf course that also serves as a pasture for livestock, and the Abbey, which serves as a pilgrimage site for 130,000 people every year. I got there, not really knowing what to expect, but what happened was this: As I slowly let myself get in the rhythm of the island, as the waves and wind of the Atlantic Ocean churned all around us, as the worship in the Abbey resounded, and the bleating of sheep echoed across the hilltops,

something came over me. And over the course of that day, I went from self-sure scholar to pensive pilgrim.

I've heard people gush about finding thin places — places where heaven and earth, where God and creation are barely separated from one another. For some of you, your thin place is on your back deck watching the birds; for some it's the prairie, or maybe the mountains. For some it's worshipping at Village Church on Sunday morning. Thin places are out there, and when I first found mine, I was disturbed, distressed and laid low.

When I crawled into bed that night, I remember feeling as churned up as the ocean shallows, and when I woke up early the next morning, it had only gotten worse. So, I threw on my shoes and started walking from the eastern edge of the island to the west. When I couldn't go west anymore, I turned north, through the pasture/golf course trying to put this feeling behind me. But it kept catching up to me.

In a last-ditch effort, I started climbing the tallest outcropping I could find. The sheep scattered as, level by level, I heaved myself up. I distinctly remember coming eye-to-eye with a lamb with this look like "What are you doing up here, man?" I got to the very top, and to my dismay, I found that I couldn't outrun my pursuer. I gave up, sat down with my legs dangling over the sheer face of the side facing the ocean, and the thought I had been trying to avoid jumped on me something bad: "You know this isn't who you should be or

how you should be doing this.” And when I read Jesus’ words to Peter — “You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” — well, even today, it cuts me to the quick.

To this day, I don’t think this thought came from within me, because often when that kind of self-criticism starts there, it’s saturated with shame and crippling guilt. But this thought that something wasn’t right, that my way of being wasn’t right, it was like a punch to the gut that put air back *in* my lungs. It was like I could breathe, really breathe, for the first time since St. Andrews. Sitting on top of that stone pillar, listening to the waves and wind, and watching beams of morning sunlight breaking through the clouds overhead, I felt whole again. In the exact same moment, I was rebuked and renewed, and then I had to remove myself from this outcropping because there was a flock of sheep bleating at me to get off their outcropping.

On my way back to the room, I stopped by a house that had a bucket full of stones and a slot you could place a pound in if you wanted one. I picked out a large, dense stone that is in places white, but in others stained with a pale green tint. It’s incredibly smooth and almost looks polished, except for where it’s not — where there are small jagged edges and deep lines formed by millions of years of geological pressures. I really wanted this perfectly imperfect rock because on its large face, someone had carved a cross into it. As I held it and looked at it, I came to understand that I was looking

at myself: this thing, beautiful, made by God; this thing, uneven, chipped and shot through with imperfections; this thing, above all, marked and claimed as Christ’s own.

Knowing Peter’s story, my heights don’t look so high, and my lows don’t look so low. And I’m going to guess it’s the same for you. St. Peter, the Rock, is like that Rock I chose: solid, but imperfect. And that Rock is the one on which the church — on which we are built. So, we shouldn’t be at all surprised when something beautiful is then stained, or when the cracks caused by the pressures of the world are right beside our most polished parts.

The challenge for us is to hold the reality of who we are in tension, lest we either start believing our hype or losing our hope. Both are temptations in the Christian life, and both take us off the path of discipleship. St. Peter, the Rock, didn’t do that. He came up short plenty, and did his fair share of good, but the most important thing about him is that he followed Christ step after step after step. I cannot, standing here today, think of a more important time than right now for people like us to make sure that’s exactly what we’re doing for a whole lot of reasons.

And one of those is gun violence in our county and in our community. Less than 48 hours ago, 25-year-old Erin Langhofer, who helped survivors of domestic abuse at Rose Brooks Center, was hit by an errant bullet in downtown Kansas City, leaving her family and friends to mourn

and wonder at the senselessness of it all. And yesterday, in El Paso, Texas, and last night in Dayton, Ohio, that same shock and loss played out on a much larger scale.

A week earlier it was in Gilroy, California. A month before that, it was in Virginia Beach. A year before that, it was in Annapolis, Maryland. Five years earlier, it was at the Jewish Community Center in Overland Park. And 10 years before that, Killeen, Texas, and 10 years before that, Columbine High School.

The list goes on and on, and I am struck, as I think about what the church’s role in all this might be, by Jesus’ last words to Peter in the gospel of John. Three times Jesus tells Peter, “If you love me, feed my sheep.” Feed my sheep. Take care of the flock. If that’s his job, and he’s the foundation upon which we are built, then it’s our job too.

I’m going to be the first to admit I don’t know exactly how we do that. But we have to do something about gun culture in this country, that’s for sure. It’s also about a lonely world getting lonelier, a long history of harm to people of color in this country, a mental health crisis, unsafe neighborhoods, toxic masculinity and white nationalism. It will be a long time before we peel back all the layers to this, but when I start thinking about our “solutions” — our kids running drills at school, armed security at the grocery store, and trainings in businesses, schools and churches that remind you if cornered you should throw books and staplers

at an armed assailant — I have to ask: Is this really the best we can do? Because when I read scripture, I read of a day when righteousness and peace will fill all our lands; a day when swords will be beaten into plowshares; a day when no one shall know harm on God’s holy mountain. That’s the divine wisdom we need now to guide us and lead us forward.

Because there are people hurting in our midst right now, and because there’s a boy turning 6 tomorrow, who loves “adult humor” because it makes everyone else laugh, and he deserves better. We all deserve better! Maybe one of the ways people like us can be of most help at this moment is to keep the vision of peace and reconciliation found in scripture in view of our hurting world — so that people resist the temptation to normalize, or become desensitized to, this brutality. Maybe people like us can tend the flock with the truth and hope that comes from God and is acted upon by us.

He still calls each and every one of us, imperfect, but solid stones, marked as his own, to *keep on building*. So, let us give thanks to the God who continues to prepare the table with bread and cup for us, so that we might be built up for the work ahead.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.