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Series: Wandering Hearts: Figuring Out Faith with Peter

Sermon Title: Jesus Challenges

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Text: [Matthew 16:21-23](#)

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In the late 1920s, Roy Riegels was known as one of the best college football players of the time. He was both a center and a middle linebacker on the Cal Golden Bears Football team. The Cal Golden Bears were playing Georgia Tech in the 1929 Rose Bowl—de facto national championship game. In the second quarter, Riegels picked up a fumble by Tech’s Stumpy Thomason at the Georgia Tech 30 yard line; he had an open field in front of him. But instead of running toward the Georgia Tech end zone, he got turned around and started running toward his own end zone.

He was caught at his own 3 yard line by a teammate who tried to tackle him, but they were both pushed into the end zone by a group of Tech players. The ref called a safety for Georgia Tech. Georgia Tech won the game 8-7, with the winning margin being the safety. They won the National Championship. After the game, Riegels said that in pivoting to get away from a tackler, he lost his bearings. One of the best college football players of the day became known not for that but as “wrong way Riegels.”

As we pick up Peter’s journey of faith today, he knows what it feels like to go from being on top of the world to having everyone know you for the wrong reasons. We are in a series called *Wandering Heart: Figuring Out Faith with Peter*. Often, we can relate to Peter; he embodies a modern-day follower of Jesus: steadfast and unsteady, friend and betrayer, follower and wanderer. His faith journey is not polished but is always tethered to the love of God.

Last week, we heard Peter profess that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah. We can’t be sure how much time has elapsed, but here is what Matthew tells us happens next:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on

the third day. ²² Then Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him: “God forbid, Lord! This won’t happen to you.” ²³ But he turned to Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.” (Matthew 16:21-23)

To be honest, there are few texts in the Bible preachers truly dread, and this is one of them. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says, “You have no idea how God works.”

Peter probably feels like he has run the wrong way. Trying to understand how God works, the will of God, is not easy. Jesus’ point to Peter, and his point to us is something along these lines: Peter is thinking as a person typically thinks based on reason, personal gain, human friendship, success. He wants just a little bit more of what the world already offers.

This scripture isn’t personal to Peter, nor is it personal to you or me. It’s simply a contrast of ways. If you have a friend or loved one who says to you, “I need to go to this place, suffer, be killed, and be raised on the third day,” we would feel as though we have an obligation to say, “That doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

I’ve lost count now of how many times a person has said to me, “I come to church to get away from it all. I don’t need to hear about anything going on outside of the church.”

I thought about that this week when I got two emails back to back. One that said, “Don’t Be in the Dark this Election Season,” and the other that read, “Does Christian Faith in America Matter Anymore?”

I have two thoughts:

This week, I’ve read about the humanitarian crises in Gaza and the ongoing violence and war in that part of the world. I read about Nex Benedict’s life through the lens of friends and family. I am also in the midst of something I do each Lent, praying for each member and friend of Geist Christian Church by name. And I know there is a lot going on in your lives and in our extended community.

And then I wrestled with Jesus’ word to Peter, “You are a stone that could cause me to stumble, for you are thinking human thoughts, not God’s thoughts.” It goes from the rock upon which I will build my church to a stone that can cause me to stumble.

As a pastor and more importantly, as someone following Jesus I’ve always assumed that any struggles the church in America is having in terms of mattering, are someone else’s doing. But this week the words of Taylor Swift have been running through my head: “It’s me. I’m the problem. It’s me.”

“You are a stone that could cause me to stumble, for you are thinking human thoughts, not God’s thoughts.” Perhaps I don’t know how God works. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Jesus is going into the fray. Peter wants none of it. He can’t imagine how Jesus knows what will happen, and he still wants to go. Peter wants to stay out of the fray.

He wants the easier path, the simple answers.

Dr. Terrence Lester tells the story of one of his toughest nights in his life. He says:

I had just received the “Humanitarian of the Year” award from the National Urban League of Greater Atlanta for the work we do with Love Beyond Walls. The evening had ended around 11 p.m. after a celebration with friends. As we left, I casually said, “I’ll talk to you later. Be safe!” Little did I know how ironic those words would soon become. My wife Cecilia drove, and I went to sleep. Ten minutes later, I was jolted upright by Cecilia’s screams. We had narrowly escaped a car accident. The car in front of us had come to an abrupt stop. The driver had become distracted by a child vomiting in the back seat and hit the brakes. Airbags deployed, and then I was on the ground. The impact of the airbag had driven me back into my seat and broken it. Moments later, the EMTs arrived and rushed me to hospital. The pain was indescribable. I discovered that my right hip and pelvis were fractured, and I suffered nerve damage. Emergency surgery followed to place a ten-pound rod in my leg to prevent it from crushing a vital artery.

It was a whirlwind of events. I had gone to receive an award and I ended up in the hospital. Previously, I had found worth in my work and believed that God was with me. That belief came crashing down in a single, devastating moment that left me grappling with my faith.

Have you ever experienced something like this, where life shatters and makes you question everything? Dr. Lester, reflecting on Peter’s faith journey, says that faith doesn’t always keep us from hardship. Instead our faith enables us to discover new ways to navigate the realities of life that we find so disorienting.

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Jesus challenges us by offering something different. He’s not offering a formula where we make a few tweaks and experience our best life. The temptation is great...perhaps that is why Jesus is so stern with Peter when Peter says, “You don’t have to do the hard thing. You don’t have to take this seriously. You don’t have to give up your own comforts.” You can have faith on the sidelines, if you want. Jesus says, “But that’s not following me. If you want to follow me, we are headed to Jerusalem, to the cross, and ultimately to true life.”

This reminds me of an Outward Bound trip to Africa. One day, they planned to hike across the Salei Plains and meet their truck on the other side that evening. They walked through tall grass, called lion grass because lions like to stalk prey in it. Suddenly, one of the group members dropped to the ground. He’d seen a lion and was freaked out. The dangers of their current position hit him, and he refused to go on. The guide told him that he must go on. There is nowhere to go back to. The truck was ahead of them. Reason did not work, and the man still refused to go on. The guide leaned down and said, “We have a motto at Outward Bound precisely for this sort of situation: ‘If you can’t get out of it, get into it!’”

I still don't like this biblical text, but Lord knows I need to hear it. We need the challenge of "are you ready to get into this faith thing, really into it? Or you want to take the easier path and sit on the sidelines?"

Do you want to be a stone that could make the movement of God stumble or a building block in which the movement and mission of God can work through us. Would you rather sit on the sidelines or follow Jesus wherever it might take us.

Let us pray.