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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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Today is week four of following Jesus to Jerusalem through the eyes and ears and heart of Peter. Originally called Simon, Peter becomes the leader and spokesperson of the disciples. We're following Peter because many of us can see ourselves in Peter. He has wonderful gifts but also shows his failings. He often opens his mouth before fully engaging his brain and, like other disciples, doesn't fully understand things about Jesus even after being taught them explicitly.

Last week and this week are cases in point. Both lessons come back to back in the 16th chapter of Matthew. Last week, Jesus asked the disciples two questions. The first: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And the second: "But who do you say that I am?" The disciples answer the first question by listing a few names from the past: John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. But it's Peter who answers the second and more important question with his profession of faith: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." It was a stellar moment for Peter, and Jesus praised him for the right answer—an "A+" on this one question test. All was going so well for Peter; he understood perfectly...until he didn't.

Have you ever been on the highest high and immediately fell to the lowest low? If so, you can certainly relate to Peter in our scripture today. He was coming off receiving grand kudos from Jesus over his correct confession and now—perhaps a little smug and confident of himself—he not only seeks to correct but begins to rebuke Jesus' statements over what was going to happen next. It is super easy to fall into the wrong thought pattern of presumption that if we understand one thing in spiritual matters, we comprehend all things. That's where Peter finds himself today.

The first words of today's passage are a clue to the structure of Matthew. Most scholars see verse 21 as the beginning of the fourth and final section of the gospel. The words, "From that time on..." is a turning point in the story. They are now, whether the disciples know it or not, clearly headed to Jerusalem. "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" (Matthew 16:21). Everything from this moment forward in Matthew will take them steps closer to Jerusalem.

In addition to taking the exit marked Jerusalem, there is also a significant turn in Jesus' ministry that begins with the announcement of Jesus' identity in the words of Peter's climactic confession. In that verse I just repeated, we hear the first of three passion predictions in Matthew. The next will come in chapter 17 and the next in chapter 20. Jesus is physically and mentally headed to Jerusalem.

Peter and the others understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but they didn't know what that meant exactly. As Jesus starts to explain to Peter what it meant for him to be Messiah, Peter has a knee-jerk, negative reaction. A messiah that will suffer and be killed? Nothing could be more contrary to the hope and expectation of Israel than for its long-awaited leader to go directly to the place where he would be in the most danger and there be tortured and killed. For the careful listener, though, Jesus includes a strong word of hope. Did you hear it? "...and on the third day be raised."

But Peter is having none of this revised definition of a messiah. We have a back-and-forth between Peter and Jesus that could best be described as "heated." First, it's Peter who rebukes Jesus (another word could be "scold"): "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him [began to scold him] saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you'" (Matthew 16:22). The rest of Peter's words might have gone like this: "Listen, Jesus, this cannot be what God intends for you. There must be a different way. This is not what our deliverer ought to do. Suffering and dying is what we have all endured, prophet and ordinary person alike. You are supposed to be different. You are supposed to save us from all our enemies!"

The common thought was that Jesus would come as a conquering king messiah. However, Jesus came instead as a suffering servant messiah. Those are very different. This is also seen as a turning point because Jesus is starting to get very specific and detailed about what would happen. Jesus says He will go to Jerusalem. Jesus says He will suffer many things from the religious leaders. Jesus says He will be killed. Jesus says He will rise from the dead on the third day.

But then it's Jesus' turn to do the scolding. "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" (Matthew 16:23). One minute Peter is praised and promised to be the "rock" upon which Jesus will build his church then; in the next moment, he is a different kind of rock—a rock that trips people up, a stumbling block. Peter was on a roller coaster ride that seemed to be headed for disaster. He was a Jew and could not fathom a messiah who would give up his life at the very moment when he should be seizing the leadership of Israel. Peter spoke for all the disciples. He still speaks for us, because we too have our minds "set not on divine things but on human things."

I ran across this story this week. I always try to fact-check my stories, and this one didn't seem to have much basis in recorded history, but it's still a good story and it helps make a point so here it is. Back when the Old West was being settled, pioneers flocked across the country to California and Oregon. In one particular spot on the Eastern slopes of the Rockies, there was a large, dirt-covered rock protruding in the middle of the trail. Wagon wheels were broken on it, and people constantly tripped over it. Finally, someone dug up the odd stone and rolled it off the trail into a nearby stream. The stream was too wide to jump over, so people used the stone as a stepping stone to cross the cold creek. It was used for years, until finally one settler built his cabin near the stream. He moved the odd stone out of the stream and placed it in his cabin to serve as a doorstep.

As years passed, railroads were built and towns sprang up. The old settler's grandson went East to study geology. On a visit to his grandfather's cabin, the grandson happened to examine the old lump of stone and discovered within that lump of dirt and rock was the largest pure gold nugget ever discovered on the Eastern slope of the Rockies. It had been there for three generations, and people never recognized its value. To some, it was a stumbling stone to be removed. To others it was a stepping-stone, and to others it was just a heavy rock. But only the grandson saw it for what it really was—pure gold at its core.¹

What Peter and the others didn't understand is that it was necessary for Jesus to die. Jesus knew about the necessity of his death, and he didn't want anyone to try and stop him from fulfilling God's will for him, which is why he had such a harsh response for Peter. Therein lies the heart of the problem: Peter wanted to determine what was best for Peter. Peter was not concerned with what God's will was for Jesus. He wasn't thinking the things of God; he was thinking the things of Peter. All this week, I've been trying to figure out the point of this sermon in the series. While I've stopped letting Ruth read my sermons in advance, when I tell her about the sermon, after I'm done rambling, her question is always – “but what's your point?”

It seems to come down to this: our thoughts are frequently self-centered, and God's thoughts are always other-centered. While our ways are often self-serving, God's ways are always about serving others. We have a choice in our role in God's plan. We can either be the rock—the foundation, the stepping stone on which others build their faith—or we can be a stumbling block or we can just sit and do nothing—be a doorstep. Our core— our heart—has great value, but how we put ourselves to use for Christ's church makes all the difference. Self-serving rocks are stumbling blocks; other-serving rocks are foundation stones.

Even though Jesus loved Peter. Even though Jesus knew that Peter got things right some of the time, Jesus still took this moment very seriously because Jesus didn't want anything or anyone, no matter who it was, to distract Him from the purpose for which He came to the earth: to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus was willing to stay committed to his task because he wanted to be faithful but also because he knew the rewards were so much greater than the sacrifice. So also, Jesus says that the reward for us is so much greater than the sacrifice.

In the very next verse beyond where our reading ended, Jesus tells them, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). If you want to save your life (spiritually speaking), you will be willing to lose your life (spiritually speaking). Jesus is talking about real sacrifice here. He says that if someone wants to follow Him, they must be willing to take up their cross and follow Him. The people of that day would have known what Jesus meant. Roman execution by dying on a cross was common in that day. To carry your cross meant to walk to your execution. Jesus is saying that you must be willing to fully hand over your spiritual life to Jesus to follow Him.

That means giving up anything that separates us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do you know that is the definition of sin that we use in Pastors Class? That's far easier than coming up with a laundry list of sins and saying, “Here kids, here are the top 50 sins.” And in questioning faith fashion, we'd always get asked about number 51. So, following Jesus fully is giving up anything that separates us from the love of

¹ As stated in the sermon, no reputable historical source can be cited. The illustration was found here: <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/83678/a-stone-from-the-old-west-by-sermon-central>

God in Christ Jesus. It serves us well to rid ourselves of this stubborn fleshly confidence—trusting and depending upon God with all our hearts rather than our own faulty understanding.

The disciples are starting to learn from Jesus more and more about what kind of Messiah he would be and more and more about what it means to be his disciple. We must learn these lessons as well. We must understand that the reality that Jesus was the Messiah meant that he would suffer and that those who follow him must be willing to suffer as well. It's why this sermon in the series is called "Jesus Challenges." If it were easy, it wouldn't be called a challenge.

The challenge is the decision you must make. Will you be a stepping stone, lifting others up in the faith because you are firmly grounded in your own? Will you be a stumbling block, tripping others up that are trying to make their way down a spiritual path? Or will you be a doorstop, just sitting out of the way, a passive bystander.

As I was writing this sermon, I ran across words by the late Maya Angelou: "I am grateful to have been loved and to be loved now and to be able to love because that liberates. Love liberates. It doesn't just hold—that's ego. Love liberates. It doesn't bind. Love says, 'I love you. I love you if you're in China. I love you if you're across town. I love you if you're in Harlem. I love you.'" ² Being a stepping stone rather than a stumbling block is the kind of love and justice that Jesus had in mind for Peter and for us. While our ways are often self-serving, God's ways are always about serving others. We have a choice in our role in God's plan. Jesus walked this path before us. Now, we will follow him in faith with our minds set on things of God rather than things of us.

² <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/536874>