

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
13 September 2015

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 116:1-8

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

An interesting title for Peter this morning, isn't it - *Satan!*

I got up this morning, as is my custom, to hear Peter. You know in the Roman Church the pope is referred to as Peter. If you attend a mass or liturgy in the Vatican when it's the pope's turn to speak the program says, "*Peter says.*" The understood successor as the bishop of Rome is the pope. And Peter is called by Jesus a stumbling block, Satan, getting in the way of his work. All of this is occurring around the question, "*Who do you say that I am?*"

There were a lot of people around Jesus just as there are today, a lot of whom feel close to him but don't get what he's saying. I'm struck by the parallels in this gospel to the parallels we're seeing in Rome with the Peter of today, the pope, who in his early days took on the Vatican Bank to straighten it out. Well, you know you're in trouble when you start putting your hand in people's pockets. Then he took on his bishops and cardinals and read them the riot act for their styles of life and for missing the gospel. And again today for all those thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Square, he reminded them to read scripture daily. Can you believe that? Try this one on for size: If Francis had been pope five hundred years ago, would there have been a reformation? We don't know, but it's an interesting thing to think about.

As we all know, the largest opposition that he faces will, I firmly believe, come from within his own organization, those who have been schooled in a way of thought and in the belief that they are right and everyone else is wrong, that they belong and everyone else doesn't, that they are superior and everyone else is inferior - you know how it goes - that they are in and others are out. And here's Jesus facing the same kind of tension when he says, "*If you believe in God the way I do...*" I don't think anything about that question matters in terms of who you think Jesus is except for, "*Do you believe that I speak the truth? Do I speak with some kind of authority? If you believe that what I say has authority, it comes from God.*" The premise then is that belief will lead us in a path of a certain amount of difficulty and a certain amount of sacrifice.

Peter was appalled that this upcoming rock star Jesus - greater than John the Baptist, gathering huge crowds of people on mountainsides and lakeshores, would say to them, "*This isn't going to be a joyride. There's a truth here which will be a stumbling block, and if you regard me in any way, if you believe what I have to say, that truth will cause us trouble starting with religious people.*"

Peter says, "*Oh no, it can't be that way.*" Peter took him aside quietly and rebuked him. And Jesus said, "*You speak the words of evil to me. You would have me behave differently from what it is I believe.*" And so at that point Peter is mouthing words of evil to Jesus.

Now I don't think it really matters what you believe about Jesus. Is he Elijah? Is he John the Baptist? Is he the messiah? These are all people the religious community had ideas about. They were all famous people. They were all people with prophetic and important words to say. The messiah hadn't even come yet. The messiah is equivalent with all that is promise and success and goodness and God's richest blessings finally coming, long awaited. And Jesus says, "*Well, who do you say that I am?*"

You have to agree with me, I think, that the text is very cagey. He doesn't answer that for us, does he? Jesus says, "*Who do you say that I am?*" but Jesus never says who Jesus is in this text, does he? And it's quite interesting because

they're told to be quiet about what they think Jesus is. But what Jesus believes is clear and what Jesus believes is in many respects contrary to the religious institution and organization of the day. So Jesus says, when asked about gay marriage, "*Who am I to judge?*" So Jesus says, when asked about divorced people receiving communion, "*Maybe it's time to forgive some of those folks.*" So Jesus says that a closed family, a closed Church, a closed society is sinful. I think those are all things that Jesus says, all things we've heard the pope repeat and all the kind of things that are going to create evil opposition for those who speak the truth and agree with the truth about the love of God for all people. And it just so happens in this day and age we have this extraordinary exemplary man, not perfect by any standards, not in full agreement with anybody for sure, but this man is willing to exercise a public office immediately and clearly with his understanding - and I think it's a darn good one - of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the love of God for himself and for all people, and that includes poor people and refugees and homeless people and disabled people, married and unmarried people, people with all kind of relational structures and says, "*Our job is to believe that we have received sufficiently God's love that without fear and shame we dare by God's grace alone and only this gift we receive from God we dare to share that with others, any and all comers.*"

Boy, that makes religion simple. Not necessarily easy to do but it certainly puts all the rest of the junk in perspective, doesn't it? The cultural junk, the ethnic junk, the geographical junk, the political junk. It puts it all in perspective that we who believe something about Jesus - be it Elijah, be it John the Baptist, be it the messiah - we who believe that Jesus speaks with a divine authority are forced to believe that the good news he shares will in fact get us into trouble, primarily with other religious people, starting with people like Peter, the closest to him, the one who hung out with him most - at some point doesn't get it. And sometimes, friends, you and I are that Peter. We're the same Peter who doesn't get it and the same Peter who when we do get it, Jesus says, "*That's the foundation of Christianity!*" And what will Christianity look like? Well, Jesus does not say today that if you do it right you get a pink Cadillac. It's not the business of earning credits and getting a reward. It's not the business of buying God's affection. It's the business of believing we *have* God's affection. It's not the business of selling God's affection. It's the business of sharing it. It's the business of making sure that those with need have, that those without get, that those who are hungry eat, that those who are thirsty drink and that God's love is never presented by us with any kind of boundary, limitation or exclusion.

Who do you say that I am? And anybody who takes any position about Jesus is just fine by me, but don't tell me who it is you think Jesus is without saying that you believe what he says. And what he says is often a stumbling block to the Church, religious organizations and our fixed ideas about what it means to be a Christian.

We're not alone in this, gang. We live in a world today with a pope who gets it, with a pope who worries about the poor, who asks us to take immigrants into our churches and homes, with a pope who washes the feet of the disabled, a pope who moves out of the papal apartments, a pope who is not uninformed about how we live, a pope who I think at one point in his past was a bouncer.

So here's the gospel for us today. Here is the good news. We can either facilitate or obstruct the gospel. And the example is we have company with Peter in the gospel today to know that the same person sometimes can facilitate and sometimes can obstruct. It's not a matter of the good guys against the bad guys. It's the matter of how we understand ourselves and how willing we are to listen to a God who offers us what we need - what we need to communicate the gospel. It's not our work. It's God's work in us. Did you hear the Collect for today: "*O God, because without you we are not able to please you, grant that your Holy Spirit may direct and rule our hearts.*" There's a line in one of Martin Luther's catechisms that says, "*I believe that of my own will and power I cannot believe,*" that even my ability to *believe* is God's gift to me. And we who gather humbly to accept all that God offers us fully, undeservedly, come together regularly to practice our need to learn how to share that generously, unafraid and freely as we have received it with others in this world. And that will without doubt get us into trouble. And without saying a word others will look at us and they will know who it is we say we believe Jesus to be: the beloved of God who loves the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.