

PREACH

The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 17A | September 3, 2017



How Jesus shows us to reject the seduction of power

Before he foretells of his death, Jesus warns his followers about the Pharisees. While it's direct, it's also cryptic and difficult. It's a warning *we've* struggled to heed in the many years since.

At the beginning of chapter 16 in Matthew, the Pharisees and Sadducees confront Jesus. They're Jewish leaders with the clout of organized religion behind them. Think scholars and theologians and religious orders. Think of commitment to the truth and tradition.

They confront Jesus after he has healed countless people and miraculously fed thousands. And because we know the story, we refuse to give them the benefit of the doubt. But if we try, just a little, to see it their way, we might find something here.

We might see that Jesus is breaking the rules and is a threat to order. He attracts these crowds of

people and these pathetic peasant disciples, eating with the riff raff and those who would destroy society and threaten the peace with Rome. To them, Jesus is dangerous.

They ask for a sign; some proof that Jesus is who he says he is. And Jesus rebuffs them and leaves.

And on their way across the water, Jesus gives the disciples a sharp warning:

Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And the disciples don't get it. Of course they don't. They take his words literally. They think he's talking about yeast and bread and how they didn't bring any leftovers from the big feeding. Because...of course they would. These aren't the scholars. They left the scholars on the other side. The bright bulbs were left behind.

The Double Meaning

Jesus goes on to remind his followers about the feedings — the signs and wonders they had all just

participated in. These signs of Jesus's relationship to God, the rightness of this ministry they are doing. He tries to get them back on point. Follow me; ignore that other junk.

They wanted different proof. The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted special proof that conforms to their world view, rather than God's. Their cynical approach to faith was to catch Jesus in a lie, rather than see what he was doing.

Jesus warns his followers to not only avoid the mistake these leaders make, but also beware of *their* teaching. Because they aren't seeing God at work in the world, even when that work is standing right in front of them.

The Dead Messiah

This brings us to last week, when Peter calls Jesus the Messiah (the Christ) and Jesus tells Peter that he has found the right answer. And this week, in the second half of that story, we realize that Peter may have just stumbled on the right answer.

Jesus has a different idea of what being the Messiah actually means.

Whereas Peter and the other disciples are thinking of the second coming of King David on a throne, Jesus is telling them he is bound to die at the hands of the Jewish leadership.

Peter Screws Up

Peter, the eager student who got the gold star last week is suddenly compared with Satan and condemned. His meteoric rise is matched by the velocity of his fall.

But Jesus's dramatic response to Peter gives us a clue to what he's really trying to tell him. It sounds like he's calling him a name and knocking him down, but he's really trying to get him back in line.

Because we remember how disciples follow their rabbi around, literally walking behind him and imitating him. Their job as apprentices is to be behind the rabbi and match his walk, posture, and social interactions.

Peter, who has just been called the Rock and foundation and given the keys to the legacy, like

Dad giving keys to the car to his eldest, steps out of line:

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

The two most obvious things. One: he's no longer behind Jesus, he's moved them so that Peter takes a posture of equal. And two: he invokes God's name in this. The same God who gives Jesus the work of a Messiah.

And Jesus immediately turns around to reclaim his rabbi position, to put Peter behind him again and rebuke him. Then Jesus compares him to the adversary, the tempter, who would prevent Jesus from fulfilling the work of God through personal power and privilege. The tempter who, out in the desert, offered Jesus that very kingship Peter believes is rightfully Jesus's.

He turns away from that and rejects it.

Repent

Remember that word, turn. Jesus turns away from Peter, from the temptation. Turn is directly related to the word repent. Which means to turn away from an old way. We repent by turning away from sin: from destructive behaviors and bad relationships. So Jesus embodies repentance as he turns away from Peter, the temptation of power.

And he places all the disciples back in their place behind their rabbi so that they can keep learning. That they might learn how to turn away from power and accept their place. That they might "take up their cross" and give of themselves for the sake of the kin-dom.

Repentance is what Paul talks about in Romans, when he says:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good

Turn away from the hate and toward love. Reject the evil, will to control and the temptation to hurt other people for the hurt they have done. Reject retaliation and revenge and embrace hope and patience.

The power in turning

Paul is so potent in his prose: giving us countless things to think about and do. It can seem overwhelming. Or it is easy to pick one of them out and hit one's neighbor over the head for not doing enough of any one thing.

But the overarching character of Paul's writing is to offer a generous heart and zealous commitment to turning away from corruption and toward a healthy, vital spirit of grace.

His writing is all about that turning. That rejection of evil and movement toward the good. It is less about the specific actions; how eager we are to list the ways we do things wrong; and more about the generous, hopeful spirit of love.

He is so into this idea, he names the power inherent in the turning, the repenting in Romans, saying:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Do not receive the evil passively, but overcome it. Turn away, repent and become.

Turn away from power

We all know the temptation of evil. Of revenge; proving what a better person we are than they.

But it isn't just that envy or violence alone are bad. Our need for power and control messes us up. And it distorts our lives, destroys our relationships, and breeds evil through anxiety and fear.

From being seen by the right people and going to the right parties to controlling the lives of loved ones and expecting them to be different than they are, our will to power is strong. And our

willingness to stand in the way of God's mission is unending.

The yeast of the Pharisees is found in the certainty that we can order our lives or draw a line in the sand like the Nashville Statement. That we can pretend our power to reject people, reject diversity, reject the very growth of the Spirit in the world isn't evil. That junk isn't Jesus, that's the yeast of Pharisees and Sadducees, that's Peter, that's Satan. And it's a stumbling block to Jesus.

And Repent

Repent of power! Repent of that will to control, to claim exclusive authority, and to reject the signs and wonders in our world of Jesus's grace! Whether it's our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, immigrants and students, atheists and skeptics, Jews, Muslims, and fellow Christians of many denominations, we don't get to reject each other.

We turn away from the power. The force of our will over them. The evil and hatred in our hearts and the fear that our days may be numbered.

We turn away from all that because *that* is evil. Love isn't evil. Power is. Hatred and fear and oppression is. Making people afraid in their neighborhoods or to go out to a restaurant is evil. Making people fear reprisal and being beaten for their sex, gender, orientation, race, creed, beliefs, ability, or anything else is evil and we turn from that.

Name it! Know that it is evil! Know that it would steal our hearts and pull us from the love of God.

Grace is that we can get back in line behind our liberator. The one who frees us from that fear and anxiety. Who walks us away from all that junk and toward the good, the hope, the love of God. That we might inherit a kin-dom, the meek and the peacemakers, the lovers and the repentant. Turning, always turning toward love.

This is the power of repentance. To turn toward Jesus and continue to learn about love and service and hope without fear.



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Worship times:

Sunday at 8 & 10 am

Thursday at 12 Noon