

Texts: Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

If Peter had not been a real person, we would somehow have to invent him. He is the disciple who is closest to Jesus, his friend, his confidante. He is also impetuous. He speaks before he thinks. Three Sundays ago we watched him climb out of a boat to try to walk toward Jesus on a stormy sea. Last Sunday we heard him make his bold confession as to who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Son of the living God. I chose to read those verses again this morning, because it's important to see just how quickly things take a turn.

Today's gospel reading takes place just moments later – Peter goes from being called the rock of the church to being called a stumbling block. He goes from being called 'blessed' to being called 'Satan.'

Right after Peter names Jesus the Messiah, Jesus explains what being the Messiah really means. It means great suffering. It means being killed. And then it means being raised.

Peter takes Jesus aside and scolds him – scolds him! – for bringing the disciples such a downer of a message. How can it be that the Messiah, the son of the living God, is to suffer at the hands of religious leaders and be killed? That doesn't happen to divine beings. No, in Peter's point of view, Jesus needs to assert victory. He needs to be that divine king that has come to save his people. That's what we want from a Messiah, isn't it? And Jesus needs to bring that cosmic victory without any mess. God could do that, right? Snap his divine fingers and take care of all the trouble and evil in this world. To be God is to be above all that muck and mess of humanity. To be God is to be above all that mud and blood and sweat and tears.

Peter is a disciple that we can relate to. We can see the struggle to believe going on inside him. Later on, in a story that is told in all four gospels, we will read about the turmoil Peter goes through on the night that Jesus is betrayed and arrested. He will fall asleep while Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane. And in the courtyard of the high priest's house, Peter will be too terrified to admit that he even knows Jesus. How can the same man who calls Jesus the Messiah, son of the living God, then claim to not even know who he is? And the irony of it all is that this is the man on whom Christ's church is built.

That's Peter. Fisherman. Disciple. A regular working guy who follows his Lord and master as best he can. He doesn't always understand Jesus, but he walks along beside him, walks in the path that Jesus shows him.

I imagine that Peter was pretty confused by Jesus' command to take up the cross and follow, that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will find it. I imagine that Peter was a literal-minded guy. But as it turns out, he did follow Jesus' command. In the end, he was there to witness Jesus' death on the cross. He was there to see the empty tomb. He was there when the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost. As an active leader of the early church, Peter preached to the crowds, he had visions and he finally came to understand that God's salvation was not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well. Peter shows us the range of discipleship, from abject failure to faithful witness.

Lots of us wear crosses as jewelry or have them hanging on the walls of our homes. So let's stop and take a minute to think about what exactly the cross means. What does Jesus' cross mean for you and your life? What does it mean to take up the cross and follow Jesus? I believe it means something different for each one of us. My cross is not the same

as yours. And to take up the cross is NOT about piling up ways to prove our worthiness or our holiness or our busy-ness. It is not about martyring ourselves to achieve salvation.

Taking up one's cross is about living a cross-shaped life.

Take a look at this cross. There is the up-and-down part, the vertical board, and there is the side-to-side part, the horizontal board. The vertical axis is all about God's grace and forgiveness raining down on us, and our thanks and praise and worship rising up in response to that gift. The horizontal axis is how we embrace those around us – with arms opened wide, as Jesus did. And in the center, at the intersection where the vertical and horizontal meet – there is Jesus himself, giving his entire life for all the world.

We, the community of Christ, are surrounded and held by this undeserved and steadfast love. And just as we find Jesus Christ in the center of the cross, we are to practice loving from the very center of who we are.

The Bible does not tell us where or when Peter died, but the legends that formed around him claim that eventually he made his way to Rome, where he was martyred by being crucified head down. And it is highly likely that if he went to Rome, that he was there as a missionary, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

It's even possible that the community of Roman Christians to whom Paul wrote had a connection to Peter. We don't know. But here, in this letter to the Roman Christian church, Paul gives them instructions about how to live that cross-shaped life.

It begins in the center – here at this baptismal font, the intersection of God's grace and our sinfulness. It begins here in our worship, where Jesus meets us in song and in prayer, in wine and bread. It begins right here on the cross, the place where we find Christ with his arms spread wide in love.

Paul's instructions ripple outward in concentric circles from this center, like ripples on water. They radiate out from those nearest to us to those who are farthest away.

In the innermost circle is how we treat each other in this immediate community.

Love one another in mutual affection, Paul instructs. Outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. The relationships begin here, among those of us who have been gathered by the Holy Spirit into this community, this congregation.

In the next circle is how we live in relationship to the wider church, and to those with whom we come in contact each day. We are to contribute to the needs of the “saints,” to Christians in other communities. We are to extend ourselves in hospitality to strangers. We are to be generous to those with whom we share a faith and with those whom we do not.

As we move further out, Paul’s instructions become more challenging. This time the circle expands to include our enemies. Paul speaks of such love in the context of God’s own action. God reconciled himself to us while we were enemies through Jesus’ death, so that we might be saved by his life. To be children of such a God is to love not only the people who love us, but to love even those who mean us harm.

We live in a world that seems always to want to strike back when threatened, to strike out at enemies, real and perceived. We are watching all that play out, in Charlottesville, VA, along the border with Mexico, and in places like Syria and Afghanistan and Ukraine. It is easy, so easy to draw that line and declare that anyone on the other side of it is an enemy. When you are honest with yourself, you have to admit that you do it all the time. I do it, too. We sort people into categories, by what we can see – skin color, dress, gender. We sort people by what we can hear -- the way they speak, their

accent or grammar. And we sort people by what we guess at – intelligence, religion, sexual orientation. And then based on all those assumptions, we sort people into groups – who is inside the circle and who is outside. Insiders receive benefits, while outsiders are left out. It happens all the time. Frequent flyers get upgraded. Members get discounts. Those who belong know the language, the jargon, the gestures.

Our baptism, however, erases all those lines. In the water of baptism, each of you has been named as God's beloved child. We are brothers and sisters living in the Spirit. Paul's instructions are for people who have died and risen in the new birth of baptism. People who are leading cross-shaped lives.

I have two stories to tell about water: the first is from a couple of weeks ago in Charlottesville. I have two seminary classmates who were there, along with a large group of clergy of all faiths and denominations. They placed themselves in between the two groups, the neo-Nazis on one side and the counter-protesters on the other. And they handed out bottles of water. To everyone, no matter what side they marched on.

The second is from this past week in Houston. We have seen and heard countless stories of people coming to the aid of their neighbors. Regular folks who got into their boats, risking their own lives to go into the worst of the flooding and bring people to safety.

One more point. This life, this way of living that Paul writes about – takes place in community. We can almost hear him say it: Don't try this alone. His instructions are for the church, not simply for each one of us individually. He writes to the church in Rome and he writes to us in Chadron. Because we are the church. We are God's people gathered and empowered by the Holy Spirit. God's love for us is extravagant and relentless. Only as we are transformed, only as we understand, like Peter, what it means to follow Jesus, are

we able to live this cross-shaped life. It isn't easy, but that is the point of grace, isn't it?

When we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit at work in the world, working through us,

working in love, listening and hoping and sharing and forgiving and welcoming – well, that

would be a whole new way of doing things, wouldn't it? That would be losing our lives for

Jesus' sake. That would be a new creation, wouldn't it? That would be taking up the cross

to follow Him.