

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Pentecost 13
August 30, 2020

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, sometimes we just can't help but smile at Jesus' wicked sense of humor.

Last week our gospel text consisted of the confession of Peter.

Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do say that I am?"

And Peter responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

To which Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

And then our gospel reading for today picks up from there.

And Jesus begins to tell the disciples that it is divinely necessary that he (Jesus) 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.

It is divinely necessary that Jesus must suffer and die, and on the third day be raised.

But even though it is divinely necessary for these things to take place, Peter will have none of it.

Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you."

And Jesus responds in a most forceful way, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" That is some pretty strong language.

And Jesus goes on to say, "You are a stumbling block to me, Peter."

You are a stumbling block to me. Wow!

PAUSE

Like I said, we can't help but smile at Jesus' wicked sense of humor.

Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which the church will be built.

Indeed, Peter in Greek means "rock." Peter's name in Greek is "Petros."

And so, we can think of the word "petrified"—to turn into rock.

We can think of the word "petroleum"—oil or gasoline.

Petroleum literally means "oily rock," "oil that comes from rock."

So Peter's name in Greek means rock.

It is the root of certain words in our English vocabulary.

And, if we are so inclined we might even call Peter, "Rocky."

And it is Peter, this rock upon which the church is built...

And it is this same Peter who now in this gospel passage today is called what? A stumbling block.

Did we see that?

Peter who is the Rock upon which the church is built is now a stumbling block of stone.

Maybe we missed it, so let me break it down for us.

Peter...the one upon whom Jesus says is the foundation of the church.

Peter...the one who in the Catholic faith is the first pope.

Peter, who only a few verses before is nicknamed Rocky, is now described by Jesus as a stumbling stone.

Jesus' wicked sense of humor is on full display here.

PAUSE

Now, if we weren't sure, a "stumbling stone" or a "stumbling block" is according to my bible dictionary, any obstacle that may cause someone's downfall, whether literal or figurative.

Any obstacle that may cause someone's downfall, whether literal or figurative.

And in the case of Peter and Jesus, Peter is a stumbling block because he is opposed to Jesus going to Jerusalem, so that Jesus can suffer and die, and be raised.

Peter is a stumbling block because he is opposing what is divinely necessary.

Peter is a stumbling block because he is standing in the way of Jesus' destiny.

He is a stumbling block because he is an obstacle for God's plan to come to fruition.

PAUSE

Now, interesting fact, the word in Greek for stumbling block is skandalon.

It is the word from which we get our modern English word "scandal" or "scandalous."

And when we think of that word "scandal," we think of the headlines on those tabloids at the supermarket check-out.

When we think of the word "scandal," we think of the reports on those television programs that harp on celebrity news.

When we think of the word "scandal," we think of the likes of Laurie Loughlin and her husband Mossimi Giannulli and the college entrance scandal.

When we think of the word "scandal," we think of the Ellen Degeneres Show and the toxic workplace scandal.

When we think of the word "scandal," we think of Jerry Falwell, Jr., and the sex scandal involving him, and his wife, and a business partner.

When we think of the word "scandal," we can on and on and on with examples.

And the news loves a scandal, why? Because people love to hear about a scandal.

And, maybe that is why Christianity was able to grow the way it did during its infancy.

Because Christianity itself was based on a huge scandal.

Indeed, God has a wicked sense of humor, for God decided to base God's plan of salvation on of all things, on of all things, a scandal.

Yes, Christianity is based on the biggest scandal of all.

That scandal is the fact that Jesus suffered and died and rose again.

Now, yes, that hardly seems like a scandal to us.

But, we are 2000 years removed from when this scandal first broke.

But at the time this story must have made big news.

Jesus Christ, God's own Son, the Jewish Messiah was to suffer and died on a cross.

The apostle Paul said this about Jesus' suffering and death.

He said, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block (a skandalon) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

This news was a stumbling block.

This was a scandal that God's Messiah would suffer and be crucified.

This would have been utterly offensive, scandalous to ancient Jewish sensibilities.

Forget the fact that Jesus is declaring himself to be God's Son.

And forget the fact that Jesus is declaring himself to be the Messiah of God.

But the fact that Christians were glorifying in Jesus' arrest and conviction as a criminal.

Glorifying in his brutalization and crucifixion.

Glorifying in his being hung on a tree, when Deuteronomy 21:22-23 states "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."

The full passage from Deuteronomy reads, "Anyone convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree. You shall bury him that same day," so says Leviticus.

"Otherwise, he is the cursed of God."

As an aside, these verses in Leviticus may be why our NT scriptures say that Jesus died so quickly on the cross, and why Pilate allowed Jesus' body to be removed and buried.

For the ancient Jews, Jesus' death on a tree was scandalous.

It was abhorrent to their sensibilities.

Which is why Paul says to Jesus, "God forbid it. This must never happen to you. You can't suffer death, least of all death on a tree."

And so yes, Jesus' death would have been scandalous.

It would have been an obstacle of faith for the ancient Jews.

The early Christians were glorifying in Jesus the very Messiah of God, who is crucified, cursed on a tree.

That would most definitely offend Jewish sensibilities.

Yes, sisters and brothers in Christ, God has a wicked sense of humor.

PAUSE

Now today, the Christian church still glories in this scandal.

Today, Christians still devote their lives to Jesus, the crucified Messiah.

Today, Christians even conform their lives to this scandal.

Jesus tells his disciples, those who would profess to be Christian...

Jesus tells us that those who want to save their life, will lose it.

And those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

That is scandalous, to conform one's life to Jesus.

Who would willingly give up their life?

Who would willingly lose their life?

Life is to be valued, isn't it?

Life is to be savored, right?

I mean, we are only given a certain amount of time on this earth.

Our existence is momentary, transitory.

Life is fleeting, passing away.

Why would anyone then choose to lose their life?

But, Jesus is not speaking about giving up our lives per se, although sometimes that does happen.

Jesus is not talking about ending our life.

But Jesus is talking about surrendering our life to a higher good.

Jesus is talking about living our lives differently from how the world lives.

It is about living not for ourselves, but for our neighbor.

Indeed the apostle Paul said these radical words, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition nor vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.”

Value others above ourselves.

That is scandalous, for it offends our modern sensibilities which say that life is all about what I want, what I need, what I desire, the heck with my neighbor.

Valuing the lives of others above our own is scandalous, it is offensive to modern sensibilities.

And surrendering one’s life is also about forgiveness and mercy.

It is about being contrite and willing to admit our wrongs.

It is about being compassionate and tenderhearted.

And these things—forgiveness and mercy—again are scandalous, because it offends modern sensibilities which say that life is all about power, it is all about strength, it all about dominance.

Forgiveness and mercy, on the other hand, are said to show weakness and vulnerability.

And surrendering one’s life is also about service.

It is about the giving of one’s self, our time and our energy.

Surrendering one’s life is about altruism and volunteerism.

Which again smacks in the face of modern sensibilities, which see life as one where we are to make our mark, earning as much as we can as fast as we can, even at the expense of others. It is not about volunteering.

To the contrary, do we know how serving others is seen in our society? It is seen as a punishment.

Community service is what the courts give to people who have to pay for a crime they have committed.

PAUSE

This is God's wicked sense of humor.

It is the counter-cultural life, a life lived differently from how the world would have us live.

It is a life surrendered.

It is a life embodied in Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve.

Who came not to make his mark, but was marked by nails.

Who came to forgive and to show mercy.

Who came to surrender his life that all people might have life.

This is Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is God's scandal, a scandal that offends the non-believer, a stumbling block to those who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

But for those of us who do believe, God's wicked sense of humor is the scandal which continues to be that foundation stone upon which the church is built.

Thanks be to God. Amen.