

## Matthew 16:13-20

The gospel story this morning marks the turning point in Jesus' public life. Up till now he's been teaching and healing and basically working the will of God in Galilee and its environs. After this he's going to turn his face toward Jerusalem, and we'll hear more about him getting into trouble and preparing for humiliation and death. At this moment, he stops everything and asks his disciples who people are saying he is. They tell him all the slots people are trying out for him. Then Jesus says, "Who do *you* say that I am?" and Peter names him as messiah and son of God. Jesus blesses him and pronounces him, Peter, the rock on which he will build his church, against which the powers of death will not prevail.

You know, there are two ways you can read that. First, the one Peter hears and the one I think our culture hears, is as follows: "I'm going to be the winner, the big victor over the malign forces in your lives, and you, Peter, will represent me on earth in a position of power and glory." That *Christus Victor* image of Jesus is extremely popular—whether he's victor over Rome or Babylon or Egypt or Washington, or victor over the abstract powers of evil and death.

The other way to read that is with our post-Easter vision, when we know more about the counter-intuitive, sacrificial nature of Jesus' kingship. Then we understand that Peter is, with only partial awareness, pronouncing Jesus as the one sent by God to suffer and die. Then Peter, as the rock on which the church is built, is shown to be a flawed and fragile foundation for Jesus' community—a peculiar choice for Jesus to make. This second reading, though, helps us understand why Jesus might caution the disciples to keep his identity to themselves—they don't yet understand what it means. The "keys of the kingdom" that Jesus gives to Peter are the ability to interpret his teachings, because Jesus *has* been training them since the Sermon on

the Mount. However, they need to go farther on the journey before they understand fully who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

The turning point we've come to in the Jesus story is his choice of a flawed, unfinished disciple as the foundation on which to build his church. And his instructions not to tell the world about him yet, because the world is also unprepared to understand his message. Why?

The powers that be, as Walter Wink called them—the powers that run empires—staff up with an eye to excellence. They are ruthless in acquiring and exercising power, and they do not burden themselves with ethical scruples or a sense of responsibility toward the rest of the world. They run for office in order to win, by fair means or foul. They devise clever plans to avoid paying taxes and hoard wealth for themselves. They assassinate journalists and intimidate judges; they are not averse to breaking eggs to make an omelet. They do not give up power willingly. Yet our calling as disciples of Christ is to exercise the power of love such that it prevails over the power of greed and inhumanity. This is not a fair fight.

We have on our hands not only the ills that we're used to, but now, enormous numbers of neighbors out of work and kids who can neither go to school nor stay home from school without tremendous risk. We have a criminal cabal running the White House and the Senate, still imprisoning families at the border, drilling for oil in fragile environments, and denying the seriousness of the pandemic.

I think we have work to do at two levels. One level is internal and spiritual; the other is external and physical.

Last Monday, Michelle Obama gave the closing speech for the first night of the

Democratic Convention. She addressed the external, physical level of the question, saying, "Over the past four years, a lot of people have asked me, "When others are going so low, does going high still really work?" My answer: going high is the only thing that works, because when we go low, when we use those same tactics of degrading and dehumanizing others, we just become part of the ugly noise that's drowning out everything else. We degrade ourselves. We degrade the very causes for which we fight.

". . . this is not the time to withhold our votes in protest or play games with candidates who have no chance of winning. . . . We've got to vote early, in person if we can. We've got to request our mail-in ballots right now, tonight, and send them back immediately and follow up to make sure they're received. And then, make sure our friends and families do the same.

"We have got to grab our comfortable shoes, put on our masks, pack a brown bag dinner and maybe breakfast too, because we've got to be willing to stand in line all night if we have to."

Michelle Obama made the case well for fighting back against the specific evils of our time and place at the external, physical level. Essentially she said that we cannot afford to become like the evil we fight, and that we're just going to have to exert all the energy we have to make a change in our government in the next election. It's a version of discipleship—engaging in dismantling certain mechanisms of evil from a position of no privilege. Some voters *will* have to wear comfortable shoes and bring snacks in order to get to where they can cast the ballot to which they're legally entitled. But when we grow tired or discouraged or cynical—when we lose contests we should have won and couldn't afford to lose—we need more than

external strategy. We need the internal, spiritual conviction that being Jesus' disciples *is* the way to accomplish God's work in the world.

In *Reflections on the Unknowable*, Thomas Keating wrote, "**Powerlessness is our greatest treasure.** Don't try to get rid of it. Everything in us wants to get rid of it. Grace is sufficient for you, but not something you can understand. To be in too big a hurry to get over our difficulties is a mistake because you don't know how valuable they are from God's perspective, for without them you might never be transformed as deeply and as thoroughly." He's talking about personal, spiritual transformation—internal change so profound that you can actually maintain the energy and hope to keep up the external work. His words point us back to Jesus' peculiar trust in Peter, with all his flaws. Peter was so powerless over his own flaws that he denied knowing Jesus three times, out of fear. He was still unfinished and imperfect when Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving the apostles completely on their own. But "powerlessness is our greatest treasure."

I think Keating is saying that when we have struggled long and hard and fruitlessly to perfect ourselves, we have no choice but to accept God's grace. That means accepting that when everything else falls away, love remains—love of the unlovely, even. And *that* means that love is what we have to bring to every gun fight, because guns or hate or dominance simply replicate themselves and fix nothing; they are mirages of solutions, not real solutions. The inner process we all need to engage in is Peter's process of coming to awareness of our demons and our own powerlessness against them, so that God can remake us and endow us with the power of love.

I read somewhere—and it might have been a teaching thread on the DMACC FB page—that the most important thing we should do day to day was to behave transparently, fairly, and with integrity to our students. What that does is confirm to them that justice does exist, and that good people are not rare and exotic. It makes them believe that there's a way to engage with the world that they can feel good about, that life is not nasty, brutish and short. It seems simultaneously a puny ask *and* an enormity—to embody fairness and trustworthiness for students so that they're willing to ally themselves with those qualities. I bring this up because it seems to me to be a species of the inside informing the outside which then informs the inside. But here's a more poetic, maybe more memorable example:

There's an old Jewish story about a rabbi asking his students how they can tell a new day has dawned upon the earth. One crafty student said, "Well, you can tell it is a new day when there is enough light to see the difference between an apple tree and a pear tree." It was a good answer but not the right answer. Another student said, "Rabbi, you can tell it's a new day when you can look down the road and tell whether or not the animal up ahead is a fox or a dog." Again, a good answer but not the right answer. The rabbi then looked at his students, paused for a long time, and finally he said: "It's a new day when there is enough light that allows you to see the face of another human being, and looking upon that face, you see your brother or sister. Until that happens . . . it is still night."

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and assigned that proclamation to people who were unprepared to execute it well, in a world that was unprepared to receive it well. The very nature of our discipleship is to be outgunned and outmaneuvered by the powers that be. Simply strategizing about winning will not help us win *enough*. Finally we just have to claim our

flaws and our powerlessness over them, and claim our kinship with every creature under heaven. We have to resort to love.

Let us pray:

Holy and Gracious God  
We give you thanks for the gift of life  
for the gift of Jesus and  
for the gift of the Holy Spirit

Lead us through our trials  
--suffering and sorrow, challenges and struggles, tired times and dark places

Be with those who weep or cannot sleep, who have no peace, who have been flung into chaos.

Fill us with hope, with patience, with stamina

Transform us in your image  
to grow, to understand, to be wholly directed by love.

And in wholeness may we be the hands and heart of Christ.

Amen.