

Matthew 16:13-25

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

“Seriously, Jesus Was Joking”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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People ask me in the Fellowship Hall why I never have a doughnut on Sunday morning. They think maybe I know something about the doughnuts that they really ought to know, wish they did know, which is the reason I never have one. The truth is, sermons, are emotionally difficult to preach, and in the delivery of a sermon on a Sunday morning, there is an attendant visceral consequence. Every sermon I preach carries its own jeopardy, and each is different from the other. At my last appointment, I was afraid, and I always knew where the door was and how I could get out of it, because there were anonymous letters coming in. I got death threats there. I called the police. We called in a graphologist. We compared signatures. I know who it was. I kept one eye on my sermon notes, and one eye on Richard where he sat toward the back of the sanctuary, and I never ate doughnuts in the Fellowship Hall there.

Here, it has been a little more sanguine. So far, the sermons have been received with a degree of civility. Although there was one on feminist theology that provoked widespread annoyance, such that it has inspired me to do something I have never done in the past, and that is to preach it again. Which I will some day. There have been sermons, I confess, I have loaded up and aimed at particular church members, and it has been a big disappointment when it seemed they didn't get it. But today it's a different fear as I push the homily toward the balcony, I fear that once I start, the congregation will stop, and I will find myself at the end of the hour standing alone with a profound point having been made with no one to hear it. And if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it

make a sound? Charles Perce raised that question. Or, if a sermon is preached from a pulpit and the people do not pursue it to the end, was the preacher present? pondering pursuit by another Charles. In other words, even if you want to, you know, quit on me, even if you want to opt to put together your grocery list or write the opening paragraph of the next great American novel, or ponder the probability of John Fox or Tim Tebo and the Broncos fortunes or the Rams or the Buffs, even if you want to do that, if you stay with me for the next twenty minutes, and if you finish listening when I finish talking, I'll meet you in the Fellowship Hall after worship and we'll have a doughnut and a cup of coffee together.

Do you know, it could be like the letters to the preachers received from a group of nine-to-ten year old children who were asked to express their opinion about the worship service that was the project from one of the Sunday school teachers. It ended one week after it was conceived, when the preacher got the letters and they concluded, "Dear Reverend, I like your sermon Sunday especially when it was finished." signed Ralph. "Dear Reverend," Margaret wrote, "I like to go to church every Sunday because I really don't have any choice." Or Justin, who wrote, "Dear Reverend, thank you for your sermon Sunday. I will write even more when my mother explains to me what it was you said." There are books to support what I'm about to tell you. Elton Trueblood wrote a book years ago, *The Humor of Christ*, Henri Cormier wrote a book, *The Humor of Jesus*, and both of them and many others will tell you that some of what we find that Jesus is reported to have said is best understood as ironic humor. Seriously, Jesus was joking when he said it, and that text today reinforces that point.

There was this meeting, Simon was there, and Jesus said, "Who do you think I am?" And Simon said, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God," and that's when Jesus did it. He said, "Simon, you're a rock. And your name will be Rock." Nobody was named Rock in those days. Peter, Petros, It means rock, and upon this rock I'm going to build the church. Surely, Jesus was joking. Calling Simon a rock? Had to be a joke. Jesus couldn't have been serious, could he? Let's look at it. First of all, Simon Peter was irresponsible. He was out of it. Without a clue. Not someone you could ever trust. Martin Luther King said once, "The time is always right to do what is right, but first you have to have the courage to do it. You have to have a will, and you have to find a way."

When Jesus was in the garden, and he took Simon Peter and some of the others with him, and asked them "Stay awake with me." It was the only thing he ever much asked of them. "Stay awake with me," he said, "The end is near. I need my friends. Can you stay awake for a while?" And Simon Peter and the others, you know, they fell asleep. He looked at them and said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." After Jesus was arrested, after they took him off to jail, when Jesus really needed an advocate, someone approached Peter and said, "You were with him, what do you have to say?" And Simon Peter not once, not twice, but three times said, "I don't know the man," and the last time he swore profanity I can't even repeat in church what he said. Look it up. Peter was a rock, yeah. He was out of it. He had no clue. He was irresponsible. It makes me think when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, the man who was supposed to guard the president, as he and Mary Todd Lincoln sat in the presidential box at the Ford Theater.

And this man's name was John Frederick Parker. His father was a butcher. He had been a carpenter, and when they formed the police force in Washington, he joined. There were a hundred and fifty of them. And over the next few years he had to appear before the police board under charges, several times. Conduct unbecoming an officer. Visiting a house of prostitution. Firing a pistol bullet through a window. Being drunk on duty. Being asleep on duty. Using abusive and insulting language. April the 14, 1863, Ford Theater. His job, just guard the president. The play, *Our American Cousin*, at intermission, Parker invited his friend Francis Burke, who drove the coach for the Lincolns, to join him for a drink at a bar next door. So John Wilkes Booth had a clear shot at the president, because John Frederick Parker was not where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to do. Irresponsible, without a clue, out of it.

On Tuesday, our annual all-church conference, you're invited to come. We have prepared an evening with presentations and music from the Beatles. I think you're going to enjoy it. The clergy will give reports. They will be brief. Because we all remember the year when we put the names of the nominees on the big screen, and it was so small nobody could read it. That wasn't a good all-church conference. And that was the year the ministers gave the report, and we had decided we were so creative as a group, the five of us, that we would line up, each minister just in a line, and then one minister would say a word, and the next minister would say the word that then corresponded to that word, and we would develop a narrative. It was going to be spontaneous, it was unrehearsed, and it would have worked, except the first minister's first word was "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" and I think I was supposed to follow that with a second word, and I did, but it wasn't a Christian word, and we didn't look creative, we looked incompetent, we looked irresponsible like Peter. He could have had, he should have had, career counseling. He should have been given tests. The Minnesota Multiphasic or Miller's Analogy. He should have been given career counseling, a chance to find his aptitude and get in touch with his inner aptitude. Career counseling. But Jesus called him the rock, and upon the rock he would build the church. Peter was out of it, irresponsible, surely. Jesus was joking.

Secondly, Peter was also irrepressible. You know, over the top. Martin Luther King once said, take the first step in faith, but you don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step. Peter wanted to start every race from the finish line, wanted to move fast and get there soon. If he had commanded a firing squad, his order would have been, "Ready, fire aim." You know. (Bell choir a little late getting that one.) He was a go-getter, but he didn't know what he was going to go get. He over-reacted all of the time. At the last supper, Jesus simply wanted to show the disciples what it meant to serve, and he wanted to wash their feet, and Peter said, "Don't wash my feet, wash all of me." Over the top, out of control. When it could have been a little thing, he made it big, bigger than it was. When what was needed was a nod, he gave a gesture. When all that had to happen was a whisper, he gave a shout.

The story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat, when the storm came up and Jesus calmed the water, and Peter was so exuberant he jumped out of the boat and sank like a rock. Maybe that's where he got named, I don't know. Oh, you of little faith, Jesus said.

Peter was impulsive, over the top, irrepressible. He didn't think. He acted. He never thought. He never knew what he thought. He was one of these people, you know people like this, they speak and then they listen to their words, and then they figure out what they think. We all know people like that.

Someone gave my wife a book for Christmas. I like to read her books. I want to know what she's thinking. She doesn't read my books. Not because she doesn't want to know what I think. She already knows. Anyway, this book is by Nora Ephron. The title of the book is, *I Feel Bad About My Neck, and Other Thoughts about Being a Woman*. I recommend this book to any guy who doesn't understand women, which is every guy in this room. She writes, "I need more bath oil. I use this bath oil that I happen to love. It's called Dr. Hushka's lemon bath. It costs about twenty dollars a bottle, which is enough for about two weeks of baths if you follow the instructions, and the instructions say one capful per bath. But one capful gets you nowhere. A capful isn't enough, so I use quite a lot of bath oil. More than you could ever imagine amount of bath oil, and after I take a bath, the tub is as dangerous as an oil slick. But thanks to the bath oil, I'm as smooth as silk."

Whatever Peter used, he used too much. Whenever Peter spoke, it was more that he knew, and whatever he did, he went too far. He was over the top, and he didn't even know it, and he needed psychotherapy. A team of psychiatrists. Let them help him sort out his childhood. Why did he get into fishing? What were his thoughts about authority? How did he get along with Jonah, his daddy? Who did he think himself to be? Rorschach tests, ink blots, psychotherapy. Someone to sit down with him and study the aberrant behavior. He was irrepressible, kind of a sociopath, and yet Jesus called him a rock and said, "Upon the rock, I'm going to build the church." Surely, Jesus was joking.

Now, can you stay with me for one more point? I promise I'll bring this together. Peter was irresponsible. He needed career counseling. He was irrepressible. He needed psychotherapy. And Peter was irascible. He needed anger management. Martin Luther King observed, "The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where we stand in times of challenge and controversy." Peter didn't measure up. He didn't settle disputes, he created them. He didn't solve problems, he was a problem. And sometimes he just, you know, lost it. Like when Jesus was arrested, it was Peter, the said, who took out a knife. I don't think he had a permit. And he cut off the ear of one of the Roman guards. And then Jesus had to perform a miracle to re-attach the ear, we're told. He looked at Peter and said, "You're going to live by the sword, you're going to die by the sword."

When Jesus explained that he would suffer and die, it was Peter who said, "That's not going to happen to you." And Jesus could hear the anger welling up, "I'm not going to let this happen to you." And Jesus said, "You don't talk like God or anything divine. You talk like human beings, and not good ones. Get behind me, Satan, you're thinking wrong thoughts. Get a grip." Peter was irascible, irritated, quick to anger.

Will Willamon is a United Methodist bishop, and he tells the story about his wife's father. "My father-in-law spent his entire life as a pastor in a variety of United Methodist churches in South Carolina. He spent his whole life in black suits and white ties as moral exemplar to the community, doing his duty on a week-in, week-out basis, caring for his churches, and when he retired he bought a large camping trailer and he and the Mrs. pulled the trailer toward New England for the long-awaited retirement celebration trip. Somehow, on the way from South Carolina to New England, he took a wrong turn and found himself driving down the middle of Manhattan, pulling a trailer, lost, not knowing what way to turn, and a car blew its horn at him, pulled up beside him, and the driver shouted, "Old man, I wish you'd figure out which way you're going or get out of the way." And he said, "I thought to myself, here I am in New York, a long way from South Carolina, nobody knows that I'm a Methodist preacher, and I'm retired, and so he rolled down the window and looked over at the man in the car beside him and said, "And I wish you'd go to hell."

Peter would have done that, and he did. He was irascible, like the woman who said, "I'm in trouble, I just broke my husband's favorite golf club" and her friend said, "What did he say?" and she smiled and said, "He said, 'What hit me?'" Anger management is what Peter needed, some time to examine what brings the hostility to the surface and why. Maybe some small group work, so he could sit down in a circle with other people and could talk about what to do when the anger rises, so he could find a way to sublimate his passions and re-channel them creatively. Peter was irascible. He lost it. When Jesus called him a rock, upon this rock I'll build my church, surely Jesus was joking.

What does all this mean to us? Peter would have been the last person you would think to build the church. He had none of the traits that leadership needed. But truthfully, he was not the rock he became, and he did build the church, and he did inspire people and he died bravely, a witness to his faith. He became what he never had been. Surely, Jesus was joking. Was he? The joke is on us. It's the same joke that was on Peter. Because this is what we know. God needs people of vision, courage, and some restraint. And in us, God has people who need career counseling, psychotherapy, and anger management. But it's always been that way, because God works with what's available to show us what we can become. Even as God and we know who we are. Certainly the world requires better than it has in us, but we will do, with God's help. With God's help, we will do what needs to be done. So help us God. So, help us, God. Let us pray.

O God, it's people like Peter you call, and these days, we are the ones to answer. May we never doubt we are being asked to do your will. May we always know you are with us as we try to do it. Amen.