

## Whiplash

I'm really glad that our lectionary breaks up the gospel reading that we have this week and the one we had last week.

You remember last week.

That's when Jesus asks the disciples "who do people say that I am?"

"Who do YOU say that I am"?

Peter pipes up and acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Of course, if you didn't know better, you'd think everything'd be fine and dandy in today's reading, but no, instead we get a case of gospel induced whiplash.

Peter goes from being the rock on which Christ will build his church to the embodiment of the devil himself; from pope to pagan in one fell swoop!

So let's stop for a minute.

Go back to last week.

Stand there with the disciples as they listen to Peter's confession and Jesus acknowledging that he's got it right.

Now, run with it for a bit.

What's it mean to be in the inner circle of the Son Of God, for Pete's sake?

You can imagine the thoughts running through their heads:

Life is gonna be good for us baby!

Big homes, nice cars, lots of money in the bank, we're the insiders!

And as for all those outsiders out there, tough luck!

Maybe there'll be some prisoners taken and executions done, but that's all good, because we are on the inside...we are in the ultimate inside!

And out of that kind of thinking, we get a way of thinking about God that leads us to a very small god indeed.

That kind of thinking gives us a god who's all about rules and regulations; a god who delights in bright lines between who's saved and who's damned.

With that kind of thinking, we set up systems of judgment against other people, and since we're on the inside, we're always on the right side.

We use this kind of thinking to bless our nation, our wars, our economy, in other words, to bless the status quo.

That's what happens last week, when they run with what they think it means to be followers of the Son of God, to be children of the Living God.

It's all very self-centered; focused on me and mine....forget about you and yours...

And everybody's kind of happy and smiling, because we know how to live life based on folks getting what they deserve; we are at home in a world where might makes right.

So, yes, Peter says, you are the Messiah!

Yippee!!

And then we move to this week.

And here's Jesus, doing what Jesus almost always does: it's that bucket of cold water poured over our best thinking.

"You've got it all wrong!," he says,

"In fact, all that stuff.... all those daydreams that are floating through your minds..... that's the devil's work, not God's.

That's the stuff I'm here to fix, not to promote...

So if you're ready, sit down and listen to what it really means to follow the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

It means that there are no lines between people, it means that God has no favorites — because everybody is God's favorite.

And when it comes to judging each other?

Hello!

That's what got everyone in trouble in the first place, when your first mother and father ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

You're not equipped to know the difference between good and evil, so you mess it up every time you try to use it."

It's why God appoints me," Jesus says, "as the sole judge, because I let wheat and chaff grow together; I haul in good fish and bad fish, because truth be told, the line between good and evil doesn't run between 'us and them,' it runs through the heart of every single person."

No, to follow the Living God means serving each other, it means forgiving each other, it means giving up your life for each other.

There's no Cadillacs, no mansions, no cash in the bank on this path...

But there is fellowship and compassion and beauty beyond our wildest imagination.

What Cadillac can compare to a sunrise?

What mansion can hold a candle to a meadow filled with spring flowers?

How much money will you pay for a lung full of fresh air?

But there is this too, you will get to the beauty only after you've walked through the pain.

This is my way, Jesus says to them, to us, today.

It is the way of giving up, of letting go, it is the way of trust.

Talk about whiplash!

This life grounded in faith starts with a God who comes to an enslaved people, a bunch of nobodies, and announces to a murderer on the lam (that would be Moses - you recall he killed an Egyptian and skedaddled out of the country); he announces to this felon on the lam two words that forever change the course of human destiny: "I AM."

When Jesus rescues the apostles on the Sea of Galilee, as their boat is tossed by the storm, the literal translation as he approaches them is not: "It is I."

The literal translation is: "I am."

And it is this "I am" that propels Jesus into the face of Peter, saying, in no uncertain terms, that what God wants for them, what God wants for you, is neither safety nor compliance nor popularity, but freedom.

The freedom to risk security and safety by stepping out of line and following this itinerant preacher from the hills of Galilee.

The freedom to lose ourselves in service to one another.

The freedom to forgive rather than to hate.

The freedom to embrace, rather than reject.

The freedom to risk illness or poverty or even death, all because, no matter our doubts, no matter our fears, no matter our best thinking, our hope is in the one who is now and ever shall be:

"I am."

As one priest says:

"The deep secret of Jesus' hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death robs us of life, because fear of death always turns into fear of life, into a stingy, cautious way of living — that is not really living at all.

The deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life isn't to save it but to spend it, to give it away, because life cannot be shut up and saved

any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on the closet shelf." B.B. Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 79.

And this of course is the constant struggle that we endure throughout our lives, moving from what we instinctively reach for as the disciples did last week, when it comes to our obsessions with controlling people, places and things, to sit at the feet of the true God, who is completely different from what we expect; who accepts the unacceptable, who loves the unlovable.

Last week I told you that we gather here each Sunday in order to remember our common story.

And while that is true, there is another, more fundamental reason, why we find ourselves here week after week.

We come together every Sunday so that we can find strength to follow this strange way of Jesus, and to learn to spot, and decline, those temptations to follow the easier way, the way of "us against them," the way of judgment; the devil's way indeed.

Don't feel bad that this way of Jesus takes a lifetime to wrap your arms around.

If men as great as St. Peter and St. Paul can struggle with these things throughout their whole lives, so shall we.

And so, beloved, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Let your love be genuine; hold fast to what is good; love one another," and may the blessing of almighty God be with you always and forever.

+amen

