

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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It was a quick turn of events in today's episode. If you recall, last week, Peter named Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus described that statement as a "rock." Today, the very next thing Peter said, Jesus called that statement a "stumbling block." It was a jarring move from rock to stumbling block. But, for me, the most memorable part of the Gospel was Jesus' phrase "Get behind me, Satan."

Now, I don't regularly talk about Satan. For, far too often "Satan" and the devil have synonyms for a fire-loving horned creature that desires to smite all things. But, in the Biblical realm, Satan is the personification of evil; Satan is a noun for all that opposes God; Satan is a way to understand the truth about evil—that is, that evil often appears to take on a life of its own. Evil spawns, replicates, and grows. Evil can control the future. Evil can take on the form of "economic drivers," or a charismatic leader, or an idol that holds our focus. And, Jesus knew that.

Back in today's story, Peter took Jesus aside and scolded Jesus. After all, Peter had just proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah in his last statement. And, as a Jewish believer, the Messiah had long been seen as one who would come with military power to take over the occupied lands and restore it for the Jewish people. So, for Jesus to say he'd suffer and die—that did not sync up with Peter's idea of the Messiah.

And, Peter is a lot like us. Sure, the military might of the Messiah might not be our thing, but how often do we hear Jesus's words, or see Jesus's actions, or even say that we follow Jesus, but then, as soon as it differs from *our* ideology, *our* thoughts, or *our* beliefs, then we have a bone-to-pick with Jesus. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus said in the famous Sermon on the Mount, "blessed are the those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," or another way to translate it from the Greek: "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" (Matthew 5:6). And, how often do we hear that and want to take Jesus aside to scold him? We want tell Jesus stop being so political, or we Christians would rather spiritualize Jesus's statement and forget, or actively ignore, that Jesus was executed as a religious and political activist.

And so, in our collective hubris, we watch evil continue to spawn and consume. We watched as Jacob Blake, a young black man, took multiple shots from behind in front of his children;<sup>1</sup> all the while, a white teenager with a military weapon committed multiple murders but still slept in his bed.<sup>2</sup> How did we get here yet again? Well, the sneaky thing about racism, along with most discrimination, is that it becomes almost impossible to point to one person as *the* problem because it is a systemic problem. It's a problem with how we understand what is default and what is different. It's a problem with how the system trains people and how we raise our children. It's a problem that is so large, so vast, and something we are so deeply caught in that it seems to take on a life of its own. So much so, that we cannot name *who* has caused a disproportionate number of fatal shootings against Black and Brown people, or *who* has caused the disproportionate imprisonment of Black and Brown humans.<sup>3</sup> And, that is because evil tends to move beyond one person or a select few, and it becomes imbedded in the systems of this world. It gets so entwined that the only thing—the *only* thing—to break us of this situation is to call this mess what it is—and that is, “evil.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53909766>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/us/kyle-rittenhouse-kenosha-shooting-video.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52877678>

And, in today's reading, that is what Jesus did. Jesus spoke the truth to Peter when he said, "Get behind me, Satan!" In that moment, Jesus reminded Peter that the world's ways are not God's ways. Jesus reminded Peter that God's way is scandalous to a world built on privilege, power, and profit. Jesus reminded Peter, and Jesus reminded us, that to focus on divine things will look like denying oneself and taking up Jesus's cross.

And, I want to be clear here. Jesus is not saying that to follow Jesus you give up your unique, beautiful, and loveable self that was made in the image of God. The cross thing is *not* about that. Instead, in Matthew's gospel, to deny oneself is to deny what hinders or prevents you from embodying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Now, stick with me here. Remember: Matthew's gospel loves to make connections to the Hebrew Scriptures. And, the author makes the argument that Jesus is greater than the greatest Jewish prophet that is Moses. In fact, Jesus is the *new* Moses. And, a key thing Moses did was to reveal God's way of loving God and our neighbor by sharing God's law (you know those 10 commandments). So too, Jesus gave a *new* way to live during his

Sermon on the Mount. There, Jesus reminded us that God's vision for the world is a place where evil is named and confronted; a place where a new, all-encompassing family is created with all of creation; and a place where love is the primary language.

You see, in God's world, you and me, we—all of us—we are valued and valuable. All of us matter, and all of us are loved. There is nothing we need to do to earn that. There's nothing that precludes us from this gift. And, it's a revolutionary thought in a world where payment, giftedness, education, status, and privilege are prerequisites for so much.

And, so today, Jesus invites us to follow in God's footsteps to stand up to the evil that divides; to partner with our God who rejects power, control, and violence; and to follow Christ's example by specifically reminding the marginalized that their lives matter and that they are loved.

And, maybe, just maybe, Jesus' rebuke to Peter can be seen as a gift. Because, as we also hear God say, "Get behind me." It's a reminder for us to follow Christ's example to love without exception; to proclaim that the

least are lifted up; to allow our self-righteousness to fall at our feet as we look towards God's example.

So, friends, this week, you're invited to cast off what you think you know about God. Go re-read Jesus's sermons starting at Matthew chapter 5 and so too, re-read the words of today's reading from Romans. Then, do an assessment and meditate on these words. Put God's vision for the world next to how you live your life, how our church lives, and how our world operates. And before you try to explain away God's love, justice, and peace, hear the voice of Jesus calling you to follow God's example to love, to serve, and to confront injustice. Then, step into God's radical vision knowing that you are loved and sent. Amen.