

September 3, 2023  
Matthew 16:21-28

Pentecost 14  
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## “Solid Rock or Stumbling Block?”

“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.”

Harris Rock had become famous for all the wrong reasons. It was a large rock that had been the scourge of farmers ever since the land was cultivated. The rock was somewhat deceptive; from a distance it did not appear very large, but on closer inspection the way in which it was situated in the ground made it a hazard for anyone who was planting or harvesting in its field. Many farmers had attempted to remove it, only to discover that, like an iceberg, it was far larger below than above the surface. The rock gained such notoriety that there was even an expression that people would use to describe a person who was similarly immovable: *“You’re as stubborn as Harris Rock!”*

Over time, the area that was once rural began to become a suburb of a nearby city and took on the name “Harrisville” after the family who had first settled in the area. The landscape may have changed, but Harris Rock remained stubbornly the same: an immovable obstacle that frustrated all attempts to remove it or work around it. It became located at the center of Harrisville Park and was located in such an inconvenient place that attempts to build a baseball field and a playground had to be abandoned because Harris Rock stood in the way of each. It seemed as if no one could solve the dilemma that Harris Rock continued to pose to anyone who tried to conquer the unconquerable stone. One day, however, a local architect began studying the rock and the park in which it was now located. The town council had been discussing the need for a community center, and the land in the park was an ideal location – except, of course, for the fact that once again Harris Rock was in the way. But rather than seeing the rock as an impossible obstacle, this architect had an ingenious idea: incorporate Harris Rock into the building’s construction. Soon, construction equipment appeared, and before long the town gathered for the grand opening of the Harris Rock Community Center. The building featured a large gathering hall, a swimming pool, basketball court, meeting rooms for community groups – and in the entrance hall, in a place of great honour, was that notorious rock. Only now, Harris Rock was no longer an obstacle, a source of danger and consternation, a stumbling block for generations of residents. The rock that had once

been a source of frustration now took its place as a symbol of the community that would gather in the presence of this symbol of community solidarity.

The transformation of Harris Rock from a stumbling block to a solid source of community recalls the way in which Peter's relationship with Jesus transforms – except that while the rock went from a source of stumbling to a source of strength, Peter's fortunes move in the opposite direction. The one who Jesus names Peter, who will be the Rock upon which our Lord will build his church, becomes a *“stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things”* (Matthew 16:23). Today's Gospel begins with the phrase *“from this time on”* (16:21), which marks a turning point in the story, the first of Jesus' passion predictions that form a constituent element in each of the three Synoptic Gospels. Here Jesus turns inward to instruct his disciples, a focus that will continue through the next several chapters of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' passion and the disciples' following have already been presupposed and taught earlier in the Gospel (*“whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”* – 10:38), so this is not a dramatic new revelation, but now relates the confessional life of the disciples to the formation of the new community. The instruction has specifically to do with the suffering of the Son of Man/Messiah, signaled by a new word for “instruction” (*deiknyo*, Revelation 1:1). The suffering of the Son of Man is a necessary part of God's Will as revealed in Scripture: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all”* (Isaiah 53:6). There should be no doubt about Jesus' intentions when he instructs 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.”*

We do not know how the other disciples responded to Jesus' teaching, but Matthew wastes no time informing his readers about Peter's response: the disciple who has been given the name “Rock” with the promise that Christ will build his church upon the solid rock of his confession that *“you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* (16:16) takes Jesus aside and rebukes him with prayer-like words: *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* (16:22). Peter's objection may be understood as either a wrong idea of messiahship, or personal love for Jesus, or both. Peter will have none of Jesus' talk about what awaits him in Jerusalem; *“Peter expects the Messiah to conquer and reign, not to be killed.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Peter may have had the best of intentions in his rebuke of Jesus' instruction about his suffering and death, but Jesus' response leaves no doubt as to our Lord's feelings

about the actions of this disciple. Jesus' counter response is to call Peter to renewed and deeper discipleship, although at first his words appear to be harsh and even insulting: *"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"* (16:23). "Get behind me" echoes Jesus' invitation to disciple Simon Peter and the other fisherman when he invites them to *"follow me, and I will make you fish for people"* (4:19). "Behind me" (*apismou*) is not mere location, but the posture of a disciple. Jesus is going to the cross, and his disciple must follow him. Referring to Peter as "Satan" appears at first to be unduly harsh, but on closer inspection it is most appropriate. There is an echo of Jesus' address to Satan in his temptation in the wilderness when he resists the devil's third temptation by stating *"Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"* (4:10). The testing that Jesus had met and overcome in his initial encounter with Satan was not once for all; it reappears in the sincere and prayerful remonstrance of his disciple. The reason for Jesus' stern rebuke is that Peter is thinking as human beings do and not as God does. His words are not the result of spiritual discernment as had been his earlier confession (*"For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven"* – 16:17). Instead, Peter is yielding to the human aversion to suffering. Beyond that, the prospect of Jesus perishing in Jerusalem is dramatically out of step with his own expectations for the Messiah and his mission. The temptation for Jesus to accomplish his ministry in the way human criteria judge to be successful is, in fact, a demonic temptation; Satan tried to exploit this when he offered Jesus a path to world domination without the Cross:

- "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.'" – 4:8-9.

Jesus' mission is to inaugurate an alternative kingdom, a radically different way of exercising rulership and authority. Peter's rebuke undoubtedly called to mind his previous encounter with one who attempts to derail this mission: *"Now in this scene with Peter pulling Jesus aside to 'counsel' him, Jesus thinks, 'I've been through this before!' and responds with such force that Peter has to step back. He actually calls Peter 'Satan'!"* (Richard Ward). The one Jesus had chosen to be the "rock" on which he will build his new community now becomes Peter the stone of "stumbling" (*skandalon*). The difference between a solid rock and a stumbling stone is one of grace vs. nature. When Peter speaks what the Father has revealed to him, he is the sturdy foundation stone that keeps the forces of darkness at bay. But when Peter speaks from the standpoint of weak human nature apart from divine assistance, he is the stone that causes others to stumble. *"Despite his revelation from God, Peter*

*continues to think as good human beings are accustomed to think: reasonably, egocentrically, and in terms of human friendship and 'success.'*" (M. Eugene Boring).

After his stern rebuke of Peter, Jesus again turns to the disciple to continue his instruction on what it means to follow a Messiah who must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die on the Cross and be raised on the third day: *"Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'"* (16:24). Jesus' instruction is focused on the meaning of discipleship for those who are already within the community, those who like Peter have made a confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah but are still *"thinking according to human standards rather than the divine revelation."* Having spoken for the first time of his suffering and death, Jesus states unequivocally that his disciples are expected to follow him down this same road. He demands a commitment of faith that is ready to embrace the Will of God wherever it leads, even unto death (*"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."* – 26:39). Jesus' teaching is not an invitation to discipleship for outsiders, but a reflection on the meaning of discipleship for those who have already responded to the call of Christ. The teaching continues as Jesus states that *"those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it"* (16:25). The phrase "for me/for my sake" makes the giving of one's life a matter of commitment to the confession of Jesus as the Christ. Those who seek to preserve their lives by living selfishly end up forfeiting themselves, for the decision about confessing or denying Christ must be seen from an eschatological perspective. Jesus' call is backed by the promise that everyone who loses their life for Jesus' sake will find it in the end; as death was not the end for Jesus, neither will death be the end for those who are his followers.

- "In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord is risen." – Frederick Buechner.

Jesus challenges his disciples to consider what it might mean if they were to measure their success or status according to worldly standards rather than according to the standards of the Kingdom of God into which Jesus has called them: *"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or for what will they give in return for their life?"* (16:26). Jesus' questions reflect the teaching of Psalm

49 in which the psalmist offers wisdom to discern that which is truly valuable in opposition to that which seems to be of great worth but in the end is ephemeral:

- “Truly, no ransom avails for one’s life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on forever and never see the grave.” – Psalm 49:7-9.

Jesus invites his disciples to look to that day when *“he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end”* (Nicene Creed). It will be the day of judgment, the Day of the Lord when *“the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and then he will repay everyone for what they have done”* (16:27). It will be the day when the Son of Man who has suffered has been vindicated and will be the eschatological judge. He will reward or punish *“according to one’s practice,”* not on the confession one has made. It is a reminder of the call of our Lord to his disciples to be the *“salt of the earth”* and *“light of the world,”* to *“let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (5:16).

- “Judgment ... if not a call to fear, it is a call to growth, to right-mindedness, to fidelity of direction. It is a call to the human community and a reminder to the individual. We are reminded by the thought of judgment that we must make hope real. We have not been created only to come to glory but to bring with us to Judgment Day our own portion of the reign of God. We are expected ... to prove our accountability, both personal and communal, to God’s hope for humankind.” – Joan Chittister.

Jesus concludes his teaching with a promise that as death was not the end of his mission as the Messiah of God that *“there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”* (16:28). While this teaching has been widely misunderstood by generations of those who believed that the “end of days” was nigh, it is a message of hope for Jesus’ followers that the nearness of the coming kingdom of the Son of Man should function as encouragement for those gathered into his church to follow the path of Jesus.

- “This call to discipleship is a matter of community. This is not an individualistic ethic of the solitary ‘I,’ but is the ethic of the community of disciples that confesses Jesus to be the Christ and lives toward the full coming of the kingdom of God for which it prays, accompanied by the presence of Christ during its time of mission.” – Boring.

As Peter's rebuke warned the disciple of the danger between mistaking the solid rock of the Christian confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord with the stumbling block of measuring the mission and success of the church according to human standards, we who are the church that is "*God's house of living stones; we are his own habitation*" (ELW Hymn 652) must always root our mission and ministry in the Word of God that is the solid foundation upon which we continue to live and serve as the people of God. As we continue to pray that "*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,*" we must strive to resist the temptation to confuse our will or desires with the will of God for God's Church. We must continue to base our ministry on the fulfillment of Christ's will for Christ's church so that "*the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart [may] be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*" (Psalm 19:14).

- "All cross bearers are God's allies; they often set aside their own agendas for personal advancement in favour of meeting human need. They hold, by their witness, key to a kingdom, though not one of human design. Embedded in this ironic view of authentic human existence is a promise. Those who have imprisoned themselves in service to one's self have their own reward. Those who have carried crosses of compassionate service to others have not only gained a meaningful life, but have also caught a glimpse of God's eternal realm." – Ward.

Former residents who returned to Harrisville were stunned to see that their former nemesis has been transformed into a place of honour within the community. Harris Rock was no longer a stumbling block that caused damage and distress, but a piece of the community that had found a place where it offered strength and confidence. While Jesus may have chastised Peter because of his efforts to judge Jesus according to human standards, he would not bear the name of "Satan" forever but would go on to serve as the foundation stone upon which the Church of Jesus Christ continues to flourish. It is a reminder for us that as the living stones that Christ has incorporated into his body the Church, we must take care that we never give into the temptation to look upon our work according to human standards, but strive always to live and serve rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who remains the solid rock on which we stand – all other ground is sinking sand, a stumbling block to the mission of the one who is our Rock and our Salvation.

Amen.