

## **Matthew 16: 21-28**

**FAITHFUL GOD, YOU ARE THE HOPE OF ALL THE OPPRESSED, AND THE SOURCE OF FREEDOM FOR THOSE HELD CAPTIVE. MAKE US STRIVE TO WITNESS TO YOUR LIBERATING POWER, IN GENEROSITY OF LIFE AND HUMILITY OF SPIRIT, THAT ALL THE WORLD MAY DELIGHT IN YOUR GOODNESS. AMEN.**

**YOU HAVE TO HAND IT TO PETER! HOW MANY OF US WOULD HAVE THE AUDACITY TO REBUKE JESUS? HAVING JUST BEEN GIVEN THE “KEYS OF THE KINGDOM” WITH THE POWER TO BIND AND LOOSE, PETER SEEKS TO USE HIS NEWFOUND SENSE OF AUTHORITY TO BIND JESUS! PETER CLEARLY HAS A CERTAIN IDEA IN HIS MIND ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS FOR JESUS TO BE THE MESSIAH, AND NOW JESUS IS SUDDENLY GOING AWAY FROM THIS IDEA. THE MESSIAH, ACCORDING TO PETER, IS SUPPOSED TO COME AND RESTORE THE JEWISH KINGDOM BY OVERTHROWING OPPRESSIVE EMPIRES, BUT NOW JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT GOING TO JERUSALEM TO SUFFER AND DIE. SO PETER STEPS IN TO CORRECT AND SAVE JESUS: “GOD FORBID IT, LORD!” WITH MY NEW AUTHORITY I WILL NOT LET YOU AND THE PROMISE OF THE COMING KINGDOM BE DESTROYED. HOW COULD THE ANOINTED ONE BE TAINTED BY SUFFERING AND DEATH?**

**CAN YOU IMAGINE? ONE MOMENT, JESUS IS SAYING YOU’RE “THE ROCK ON WHICH I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH” AND THE NEXT HE’S CALLING YOU A STUMBLING BLOCK.” THAT’S NOT JUST A GREAT PLAY ON WORDS...FROM CORNERSTONE TO STUMBLING BLOCK...BUT SUCH A REVERSAL OF THE PREVIOUS CONVERSATION THAT IT HAD TO BE INCREDIBLY PAINFUL. CAN YOU IMAGINE?**

**PETER COULDN’T IMAGINE. HE COULDN’T IMAGINE THAT JESUS HAD COME NOT JUST TO COMFORT PEOPLE BUT TO FREE THEM. COMFORTING ISN’T THAT HARD...JUST GIVE THEM A LITTLE MORE OF WHAT THEY ALREADY HAD AND TELL THEM IT WILL BE ALRIGHT. BUT FREEDOM IS DIFFERENT. FREEDOM REQUIRES THAT THEY SEE THAT WHAT THEY HAVE ISN’T LIFE-GIVING IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

THE COMMON ASSUMPTION IS THAT WHEN PETER DECLARED THAT JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH, HE HAD IN MIND A WARRIOR-KING LIKE DAVID, ONE WHO WOULD DRIVE OUT THE ROMANS AND LIBERATE THE ISRAELITES. WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, THAT'S UNDERSTANDABLE, EVEN A REASONABLE HOPE FOR PETER. THE ROMANS WERE FOREIGN OCCUPIERS, NOT ONLY IMPOSING ROMAN LAW BUT TAXING THE PEOPLE TO SUPPORT THEIR OCCUPATION AND BACKING UP THEIR OCCUPATION, ORDER, AND TAXATION BY VIOLENCE. THE PROBLEM WITH PETER'S EXPECTATIONS IS THAT NOT THAT IT'S UNREASONABLE, BUT THAT IT DOESN'T CHANGE ANYTHING. ROME IS THERE BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE. JESUS AS A WARRIOR-KING WOULD HAVE USE TO GREAT FORCE AND VIOLENCE TO DRIVE THEM OUT. EVENTUALLY, SOMEONE WITH EVEN MORE FORCE OR WILLING TO DO GREATER VIOLENCE WOULD TAKE OVER AGAIN. WHO'S IN CHARGE MAY CHANGE, BUT THE CYCLE OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE WOULD KEEP REVOLVING.

JESUS KNOWS THIS. HE KNOWS THAT BY INTRODUCING A DIFFERENT WAY OF THINKING...ONE THAT RUNS BY FORGIVENESS, MERCY, AND LOVE RATHER THAN RETRIBUTION, VIOLENCE AND HATE...HE IS CHALLENGING THE POWERS THAT BE. FURTHERMORE, JESUS KNOWS THAT THE REIGN OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE WILL NOT TOLERATE HIS OBSTRUCTION BUT RUN HIM OVER. AND THIS IS WHAT PETER COULDN'T IMAGINE.

IT ISN'T SURPRISING, WHEN YOU STOP TO THINK ABOUT IT, THAT JESUS WAS KILLED. FROM THE MOMENT OF HIS BIRTH, HE IS SUCH A THREAT TO THE RULERS OF FORCE AND VIOLENCE THAT KING HEROD IS EVEN WILLING TO SLAUGHTER ALL CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF TWO IN THE HOPE OF DESTROYING JESUS.

NO, IT ISN'T SURPRISING THAT JESUS WAS KILLED. WHAT IS SURPRISING IS THAT GOD RAISED JESUS FROM THE DEAD. RESURRECTION REINFORCES.....IT ESTABLISHES...THAT JESUS' LIFE, LOVE AND SACRIFICE ARE ULTIMATELY WHAT WILL PREVAIL. I UNDERSTAND THAT FACT IS SOMETIMES HARD TO GRASP IN THE LIGHT OF HOW PREVALENT EVIL AND VIOLENCE ARE IN THE WORLD. BUT THIS IS JUST WHAT JESUS INVITES US TO: LIVES SHAPED BY LOVE AND FORGIVENESS AND ACTIONS SHAPED BY COMPASSION AND HOPE.

LIKE PETER, WHAT WE MOST OFTEN WANT IS A LITTLE MORE OF WHAT THE WORLD ALREADY OFFERS.....JUST A LITTLE MORE SECURITY OR WEALTH OR ASSURANCE OR RECOGNITION. BUT JESUS DIDN'T COME TO COMFORT US WITH A LITTLE MORE OF WHAT THE WORLD OFFERS, BUT INSTEAD TO SET US FREE. AND FREEDOM FIRST MEANS REALIZING THAT WE'VE SETTLED FOR SOMETHING THAT ISN'T LIFE GIVING, SO THAT WE CAN HEAR GOD'S PROMISE OF NOT JUST MORE OF THE SAME BUT SOMETHING DIFFERENT. SO THAT WE CAN HEAR GOD'S PROMISE OF LIFE, A PROMISE THAT MEANS SOMETHING ONLY AFTER WHAT WE'D PREVIOUSLY ACCEPTED AS LIFE DIES AWAY.

I DON'T NEED TO TELL YOU THAT IT'S EASY TO FEEL SPIRITUALLY DEAD OR THAT THE WORLD DISAPPOINTS YOU OR THAT YOU'VE SETTLED FOR LESS THAN GOD HOPES. THE EVIDENCE IS ALL AROUND. THE DISAPPOINTING RELATIONSHIP, THE ILLNESS THAT RETURNED, THE CAREER THAT ENDED, THE UNTIMELY DEATH MOURNED, THE DISAPPOINTMENT ALWAYS LOOMING.

JESUS DIDN'T COME TO TELL PEOPLE WHAT'S WRONG BUT SIMPLY TO ASK, EVEN WHISPER, THE QUESTION OF WHETHER WE ARE READY FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT, FOR SOMETHING MORE. AN ABUDANT LIFE.

AND THAT ABUDANT LIFE CAN BE HARD AS WE HEARD IN PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS. IT MEANS GIVING SOMEONE ANOTHER CHANCE INSTEAD OF WRITING THEM OFF, FORGIVING SOMEONE WHO HAS WRONGED US INSTEAD OF SEEKING RETRIBUTION, BEING OPEN-HANDED AND GENEROUS WITH THE RESOURCES WE'VE BEEN BLESSED WITH INSTEAD OF HOLDING ONTO WHATEVER WE CAN, OFFERING OUR FUTURE TO GOD RATHER THAN PLANNING EACH STEP, SEEKING JOY IN SERVING OTHERS RATHER THAN AQUIRING THINGS.

GOD INVITES US FORWARD..TAKING SMALL STEPS TO A NEW LIFE IN JESUS...A LIFE WE'D NEVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE AND MULTIPLYING THE IMPACT OF OUR ACTIONS FAR BEYOND WHAT WE'D EVER IMAGINED. AND JUST WHEN WE FEEL LIKE WE'VE LOST OUR LIVES, WE FIND THEM ANEW IN CHRIST.

CAN YOU IMAGINE? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT GOD IS AT WORK IN AND THROUGH YOUR LIFE FOR THE GOOD OF THE WORLD? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT WHEN YOU BEFRIEND THE LONELY

OR ENCOURAGE THE FRIGHTENED HEAVEN REJOICES? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT, THOUGH AFRAID, WHEN YOU STAND UP TO THOSE WHO SPEW HATE GOD IS WITH YOU? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT EVEN SMALL ACTS OF LOVE AND GENEROSITY CHALLENGE THE WORLD ORDER BY INTRODUCING A DIFFERENT REALITY? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT GOD WANTS FOR US NOT JUST COMFORT BUT FREEDOM? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT LOVE IS MORE POWERFUL THAN HATE? CAN YOU IMAGINE THAT THE POWER GOD USED TO RESURRECT JESUS FROM THE DEAD, LIVES IN YOU?

JESUS WILLINGLY TOOK THE VIOLENCE, THE CONTEMPT, THE APATHY, AND THE ARROGANCE OF THIS WORLD, AND ABSORBED THEM ALL INTO HIS BODY. HE CHOSE TO BE THE VICTIM, THE SCAPEGOAT, THE SACRIFICE. HE REFUSED TO WAVER IN HIS MESSAGE OF UNIVERSAL LOVE, GRACE, AND LIBERATION, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THE MESSAGE WOULD COST HIM HIS LIFE. HE BURST OPEN LIKE A SEED SO THAT NEW LIFE WOULD GROW AND REPLENISH THE EARTH. HE TOOK AN INSTRUMENT OF TORTURE AND TURNED IT INTO A VEHICLE OF HOSPITALITY AND COMMUNION FOR ALL PEOPLE, EVERYWHERE. HE LOVED AND HE LOVED AND HE LOVED, ALL THE WAY TO THE END.

JESUS REBUKES PETER SO HARSHLY IN TODAY'S GOSPEL PRECISELY *BECAUSE* THE TEMPTATION PETER HOLDS OUT IS SO ALLURING, SO DECEPTIVE, AND SO INSIDIOUS: "YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THE HARD THING. YOU DON'T HAVE TO TAKE THIS FAITH BUSINESS SO SERIOUSLY. YOU DON'T HAVE TO DIE."

NO, WE DON'T. IT'S TRUE. THERE IS A SPECTATOR VERSION OF CHRISTIANITY OUT THERE, AND PLENTY OF PEOPLE DECIDE TO LIVE IT. BUT LET'S NOT PRETEND FOR ONE MOMENT THAT IT'S THE VERSION JESUS CALLS US TO. LET'S NOT FOOL OURSELVES INTO ASSUMING THAT FAITH-ON-THE-SIDELINES WILL GRANT US SAFETY, IMMUNITY, JOY, OR BLESSING. IT WILL NOT. THOSE WHO SAVE THEIR LIVES WILL LOSE THEM. THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIVES WILL SAVE THEM. THAT'S THE TRUTH JESUS VINDICATED WHEN HE DIED AND ROSE FROM THE GRAVE. THE CHOICE IS OURS....WE CAN TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT. **AMEN.**