

The Complete Grasp of a Half-Truth

Matthew 16:13-28

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 30) 2020

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...it does indeed seem very uncertain ground to build on, doesn't it? And yet it is bedrock, for this Peter, this trembling reed, is called by God, caught by God, held by God. "You are Peter," we all are Peter; not the Pope, as the Roman Catholics would have it; not this person or that, but all of us, who simply live from our confession of faith in Christ, as the timid, faithless, fainthearted, and yet who live as people sustained by God.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1933

[The Lectionary spends two weeks on this one text from Matthew 16, mistakenly splitting it. The great danger is reading the first half without the second. The two are integrally connected. They are essential to one another. Hence, my sermon.]

One of the most extraordinary church buildings in the world, as well as perhaps the best known, is St. Peter's Basilica of Rome. It is massive and almost overwhelming in its beauty and majesty. It is gigantic. As you approach the front entrance to the basilica you approach through a massive grand arcade of columns designed by Bernini. Coming to the front doors you can look up and see statues of the saints and heroes of the faith, which do not look all that big when viewed from the ground, because the gigantic building tends to dwarf everything. But the statues of the saints are massive in and of themselves. The noses of the saints are each over four feet long!

Entering the great bronze doors, each over 30 feet high, you enter into the vast basilica. It overwhelms; just as the great architects intended (among them Michelangelo).

Move toward the central altar, under the great dome, and looking up at the rotunda and you can see in great golden letters, “TU ES PETRUS,” “you are Peter.”

“TU ES PETRUS” is taken from today’s gospel lesson. Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, with boldness and courage says, “You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God!” And Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but God has shown you this. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build this church, and the gates of hell cannot withstand it.”

“TU ES PETRUS,” “you are Peter” is across the massive rotunda of the great St. Peter’s church and this very passage of Scripture is read to every newly elected pope when he is installed as pope.

This passage from Matthew, and the words in St. Peter’s basilica in Rome have been at the center of controversy, debate, and conflict for centuries. The simple version is that the Roman Catholic Church believed these words, “You are Peter” were meant for and only for Peter and his papal descendants, while the Protestant church believed they were wrong. Hear me this morning: we are missing out on what God might have to say to us if we cannot get loose from those old

fight.

The truth is I've learned over the years is that it was then and certainly is now, that the primary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as Protestant churches, about "TU ES PETRUS" is that it means that the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ is built upon the faith, like Peter's, which builds the church.

TU ES PRETRUS is written so the congregation can see it. In other words, when we stand there and read "You are Peter," there is the realization that the words are meant for us. We are Peter. We are the church.

It is interesting to think how we read and hear this Scripture story, depending on our context. Some folks can walk into St. Peter's basilica and look up and read "TU ES PETRUS" and think, "Humph! How primitive and superstitious." While someone else might be standing only a few feet away and see the same words and be inspired and encouraged. When we are almost overwhelmed, or our faith is at rope's end, to look up and see those words, to hear these words from Jesus that "You are Peter... and the gates of hell cannot withstand the church," gives us the strength to be faithful, to not give up.

Context makes a difference.

On July 23, 1933 there were national church elections throughout Germany. These were elections held in churches all over Germany on that Sunday morning to decide the new bishops, leaders, and church constitution revisions. There were slates of candidates representing different viewpoints, including a slate that became

known as the “German Christians,” but what we would call the “Nazi Christians.” These so-called German Christians were Nazis who saw Adolf Hitler and Nazi Party as the hand of God in Germany. Already, in some churches there were photos of Hitler in the sanctuary, and Nazi flags were hung. Jesus Christ was confessed as Lord, but Hitler was confessed as Fuhrer. “One people, one reich, one Fuhrer, one God,” is how some of the church newspapers put it.

On the evening before the elections, Hitler spoke over the radio to all Germans urging them to vote the next morning for the Nazis. And the next day, the Nazis won the church elections with more than 70% of the vote.

A reminder: When you see churches, any kind of church, full of flags, any kind of flag, that should be a warning something is wrong! Beware!

In 1933 there were some Christians who knew better, and we need to listen to them! They later were called the “Confessing Church,” because they confessed “Jesus Christ is Lord.” And only Jesus Christ is Lord. The Confessing Church came to be led by people like Karl Barth and the pastor Martin Niemoller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

On that same Sunday morning, July 23, 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached in one of the churches in Berlin from this very Scripture text we are reading today: Matthew 16. He preached on how Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ is the Lord, the only Messiah, and the only one we confess. Only Jesus Christ is the Messiah he said, and there is no German messiah, as many were already proclaiming Hitler to be.

Bonhoeffer said, that the church “which cannot properly do anything other than spread the confession of him alone,” [Jesus Christ.] As long as she was doing this, she has the firm rock under her feet... Church, do not look at any other pillar... for this Peter, this trembling reed, is called by God, caught by God, held by God. ‘You are Peter,’ we all are Peter... Church, remain the church; confess, confess, confess this man.” Jesus Christ is Lord.

This week, one of our nation’s highest office holders said, “Let’s run the race marked out for us. Let’s fix our eyes on Old Glory and all she represents” (Vice President Mike Pence, spoken at the RNC). Bonhoeffer was clear, and I want to be clear: Jesus Christ is Lord. Not Old Glory! We do not quote scripture and take out the reference to Jesus and insert the words “Old Glory.” American politics has a long history of trying to use “God” to back “our” cause, whatever it is. And to make “God” mean whatever we want. Both Democrats and Republicans have been doing this for a long time. And the American church has mostly gone along with it because it gives us influence and power. Beware!

In 1936, Bonhoeffer visited St. Peter’s basilica in Rome and looked up at the golden words on the rotunda, “TU ES PETRUS.” These words gave him courage and strength. He had just come from Berlin while the Olympic Games were underway. He had just come from Berlin where there was graffiti written on the walls of churches by storm troopers saying that after the Olympic games, they will smash the church to marmalade. And here Bonhoeffer stood looking up at these words in St. Peter’s. “No! Hell cannot withstand the church; hell will not overcome the Church which confesses Jesus Christ is Lord!”

In the face of Nazism, in the face of overwhelming violence, Bonhoeffer stood and stood and stood, confessing Jesus Christ is Lord and only Jesus Christ alone. Eventually, Bonhoeffer was put in prison, then a concentration, and then executed by hanging just a few days before the Allies liberated the camp. Karl Barth, the great theologian, kept on confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord and was forced into exile in Switzerland. And Martin Niemoller, the courageous pastor, continued to confess Jesus Christ is Lord and only Jesus Christ is Lord, until he was arrested and put into prison. He survived, but only barely. For these Confessing Christians scattered as a minority throughout Germany, the words “TU ES PETRUS” gave them the courage to stand, to be faithful in their witness that only Jesus Christ is Lord. This small, persecuted, scattered, weak, powerless, beleaguered minority stood against the onslaught of hell.

Eberhard Bethge was Bonhoeffer’s good friend, and later became his biographer. Bethge says that this Scripture was read and heard yet in another context some years later. After the war, in the 1950’s, in Germany and throughout Europe and especially the United States, the church was in pretty good shape. Everyone realized that the Confessing Church in Germany had been correct all along. Everyone realized how heretical the Nazi Christians were. And now, the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord was fashionable and popular again. This very scripture text of Matthew 16 was read and heard in churches in Germany, in Europe, and in the United States as a status symbol of wealth and affluence and power.

Bethge says that it was during these 1950’s that the church in Germany and

Europe and the U. S. learned of the extent of the Holocaust. Bethge says that after Auschwitz he became aware of how this very text from Matthew 16, this very text which gave him and others like his friend Dietrich Bonhoeffer, courage and strength, was used with cruelty and violence against the Jews. For him “TU ES PETRUS” meant courage and hope. For the Jews it meant horrible cruelty and death. Bethge said, “This same text, which was for me an edification, for them it was the source of a constant deprivation and death.” And not just the Holocaust but throughout the history of the West since the time the church gained power, over the centuries.

Thus far today we’ve really only dealt with the first half of Matthew 16 and Peter’s Great Confession. This is why it is so essential to remember the rest of this text!

Jesus tells Simon Peter and the rest of the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and face those in power and he will undergo suffering and death. Peter objects! “No, Lord, this cannot be! You are the Messiah! You’re going to win! We can get you elected. Your Way will triumph! You will make Israel great again! Our enemies will be defeated! You will rule!”

And Jesus says, “Get away from me! You’re Satan!”

Someone has defined a heretic as someone who has a complete grasp of a half-truth. If this is true, then Simon Peter here is a heretic. He is guilty of heresy. He has a complete grasp of half of the truth – “That Jesus Christ is Lord.” That Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter does not know the rest of the truth: That Jesus must

suffer and die. That the Way of Jesus Christ the Lord is the Way of the Cross, the Way of suffering servanthood, that Christ wins by losing and dying – that’s the whole truth.

And like Simon Peter then and the church across the ages, including the White church in the United States, we want only half of the truth. We want the Jesus Christ is Lord, which we want to mean that the Lordship of Christ is the way of triumph, victory, and domination. We want power and we’ll vote for anyone we think will keep us in our perceived place of power.

We want the church with our flags waving – not the red, white and black flags of the 1930’s in Germany, but the red, white, and blue flags of America today. We are the church with power and influence and affluence. We have such power in this country that politicians fall over themselves holding up the Bible and talking about God and the church, misquoting scripture, and trying to enlist Jesus in their campaigns.

But that is heresy. When we are not following Jesus in the suffering and serving Way of the Cross, then we are guilty of heresy.

George Lindbeck of Yale, said in his classic work, *The Nature of Doctrine*, that the words, “Christus est Dominus,” “Christ is Lord” was a falsehood, was a lie, when it was confessed by the Crusaders as they were “cleaving the skull of the infidel.” Lindbeck says that when the confession of Christ’s Lordship contradicts the Way of suffering servanthood, the Way of the Cross, then it is false. It is heresy.

Jesus Christ is Lord. But Christ's Lordship is known in his suffering, his servanthood, his death. And whenever the church uses the confession of the Lordship of Christ in the way of power, violence and domination, we are the instruments of Satan! This is what happened to the church in Germany in the 1930's. It happened during the Crusades, and it happens here. When we seek the way of power and deny the Way of suffering servanthood, we are Satanic.

Years ago, I attended a lecture by theologian and mentor Stanley Hauerwas that was held at a large church in the state (FUMC Longview). During the lecture Stanley sarcastically suggested that perhaps we should start hanging assault rifles from our crosses in churches because we trust violence more than we trust Jesus Christ. The Area Minister (Methodist District Superintendent) became so angry that he could only spit and stutter in response. He was livid not because Stanley said something against the cross but because he criticized guns.

Hear me: there is something wrong when we get upset over criticism of assault rifles and guns. And what is more troublesome is when we justify killing and assault rifles in the name of Jesus.

Which is what Jesus is saying to Peter. To try to make Jesus Christ as the instrument of violence is sin and heresy! Jesus says to us, "Get away from me! You are Satan!" You are evil!

Jesus goes on to say to Peter and the disciples and to us, "If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves and take up the cross. For those who want

to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

This is what Bonhoeffer knew. In 1938, he was in New York City at Union Seminary and was offered a position to teach. He could have stayed in the U.S., but Bonhoeffer turned down the offer and said that he must return to Germany. He said that the Way of Jesus Christ is the Way of suffering servanthood and he would return and suffer with his sisters and brothers who were trying to remain faithful to Jesus.

TU ES PETRUS – You are Peter. We are Peter. Folks, it’s us. The church is built upon our faith in Christ, you and me. We are small, separated, scattered, and overwhelmed! The good news is that means there is no doubt, that our faith is built, not on our power, but upon Jesus Christ and only Jesus Christ.

And the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it. Not COVID that isolates us, not hurricanes that batter us, not illness that wears us down, not political leaders who demoralize us, not racism that enslaves us, not guns that threaten us, not darkness that overwhelms us, and not evil that dominates us. They will not prevail.

You are Peter.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.