

“Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 1”

Reverend Bill Gause

Overbrook Presbyterian Church

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 7, 2019

Sermon: *“Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 1”*

Two weeks ago I talked a little bit about the differences you experience when you move to a new place. Specifically, I wondered aloud about why pizza here is so often cut into squares. But as I was thinking over our experiences in Ohio, I realized that there are actually quite a few little differences, particular in the way we speak and our names for common things.

For instance, in the South when there’s a medical emergency, they call the paramedics; here folks call “the Squad.” Likewise, those cool bugs that light-up as they fly around in your backyard on warm summer nights are known as lightning bugs in some parts of the country, but some folks call them fireflies. And I’ve found that people here put chili on their hot dogs, but they call it “Coney Sauce.”

There are interesting regional language differences like that all over this country. In a nation this large with a population this diverse, you should probably expect a certain amount of variation in language, and tradition.

In the south, “Hey” is a greeting. If you say “Hey” to somebody, they’ll say “Hey” right back. But in some other parts of the country, you only say “Hey” when you’re trying to get someone’s attention. You say “Hey” they say “What?”.

I worked a summer in Maine when I was in college and I had a friend there named Arthur, though he pronounced it with a thick Maine accent so it sounded more like “Ah-thuh.” He was born and raised a “Mainuh” with all the beauty and complexity of dialect that you might imagine. Once, as we were walking home on a particularly dark night, he said to me Bill, *“It’s dahkuh ‘n a pah-ket out he-ya.”* (Darker than a pocket, meaning the night was very dark, like it would be inside your pocket). And about one fella’ we worked with, that Arthur didn’t believe was very intelligent he said, *“He’s numbah ‘n a pounded thumb, he is.”* (Number than a pounded thumb. Which is to say, not very smart). I’ve always loved that distinctly northeastern patois.

But one of the quirkiest bits of language is the Southernism “Bless your heart.” It can mean several things depending on context and voice inflexion.

It can express sympathy: *“Oh, you’re not feeling well? Well bless your heart, I’m so sorry.”*

It can express gratitude: *“Well bless your heart, you didn’t have to bring me a gift!”*

But one of its most common meanings is *“You’re not very bright, are you?”*. It expresses a delicate mix of sympathy and judgement; awareness that a mistake has been made, and pity that the person making it just wasn’t smart enough to avoid it.

Like the guy that tried to rob a bank by slipping the teller a note saying “Give me all the money”. The Teller told him she could, but only after he filled out a withdrawal slip, which included his name and address; which he did - bless his heart. Or the guy I used to know who drove with his emergency break on, just in case the regular breaks failed; Bless his heart.

I say all of this because the disciple Peter is someone who often makes me shake my head and say, “Bless his heart.” He tries so hard and in some ways he’s such a model for how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. But then he shows that he doesn’t quite get it; that in spite of everything, he still sometimes misses the mark.

Funny thing is, we do too. So, this month we’re going to retell the stories of some of Peter’s greatest head shaking, bless your heart moments; stories of times when Peter didn’t quite get it.

Matthew 16:13-25

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever

you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Now if you stop right there, Peter comes off pretty good. “Who do you say that I am?”, Jesus asks his disciples. Peter is the bold one; the insightful one; he is the one that comes up with the right answer, and not only that, but Peter is the one willing to speak up and say that answer out loud.

Maybe the other disciples knew the right answer, too. But knowing is only half the battle. Knowledge only helps you if you can act on it. Peter did and his answer was spot on. Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah. The son of the living God!

And Jesus praises Peter for saying so: *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”*

Some have argued that it isn’t Peter that Jesus is calling the foundation stone here, but the faith he proclaims. Either way, Peter got it right. He is the first of the disciples to understand who Jesus is and what he is all about. And Peter is the first to express that faith. But then we read on . . .

Matthew 16:21-25

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show 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. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to Peter, “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.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

And just like that, Peter goes from “Blessed are you,” to “Bless your heart.” Peter “get’s it”, but then again, not really. We’ve talked before about precisely how Peter misunderstands Jesus. Remember, Peter is Jewish, and he is well-versed in Jewish history, theology, and tradition. He knows about the promised Messiah of which Isaiah and Jeremiah and the great prophets wrote. That Messiah doesn’t die. That Messiah claims the throne of David and restores Israel to its rightful place in the world.

But Jesus isn’t that kind of Messiah. He will not have worldly power. He will not be a prince. He will not be a political operative working within the structures of the Roman Empire to maneuver himself into a position of power. He is an itinerant preacher, teacher, and healer. And in his humble life, loving and serving God, he reveals to the world the breadth and depth of who God is and what God does. And as nice as all that is, it is definitely *not* at all of what was expected of the Messiah.

In my mind it would have been a little like hiring a new football coach and then he stands up at his introductory press conference and says “Our primary goal is not to win games and beat Michigan, but to educate our players, and prepare them for life.” My hunch is *that* guy’s tenure wouldn’t be very long.

But alas, Jesus did not care for worldly measures of success. And he had no desire to meet the expectations of those who followed him. Jesus knows that his life’s journey will end in crucifixion. Maybe it was part of the plan from the beginning or maybe Jesus knows that he can only continue down the journey he is on for so long before he attracts the attention of powerful people; But either way, Jesus knows that his path leads to a cross.

And Peter cannot accept that. Bless his heart.

Now I think we can understand Peter. He has come to know Jesus well in their time together. There is a growing respect for Jesus; a dedication and loyalty to his teacher that colors his beliefs about Jesus. He rejects Jesus’ words about suffering and dying not only because he believes they can’t be true, but also because he doesn’t want them to be true.

If the Messiah can die at the hands of the very powers he is supposed to oppose, that will shake everything Peter believes. It will rock the very foundations of not only his faith, but the very life he has been called to live. How could he have given up everything to follow a Messiah whose journey ends on a cross? Nope, Jesus must be using some kind of metaphor; some kind of figurative language.

So, Peter pulls Jesus aside and starts “rebuking him.” Can you believe that? Peter ... chastising the one he just called Messiah, the son of God. That’s pretty bold right there, telling the man himself what he can and can’t do; what he can and can’t say.

And Jesus sort of lays into him: “Get behind me Satan,” he says. And those can’t have been words spoken with softness and gentility. Those are abrupt words - harsh words; words intended to put an errant student back in his place.

Peter’s image of Messiah is one of victory and worldly power. Jesus knows that what Peter wants would be an easier path. It would be a lot less stressful to either use his divinity to change the way things are by force. Or, maybe to the other extreme, continue to teach for a while longer, then retire to the countryside and take up the life of a gentleman farmer (or take up carpentry, the family business). Almost any other path would be preferable to this one. Any road but one that leads to death on a cross.

Peter is standing in the way of what Jesus has to do. When he calls Peter “Satan”, Jesus doesn’t mean that Peter is the literal anti-Christ. Jesus is actually evoking the original meaning of the Hebrew word “Satan” which means “adversary”. And what Jesus means is that, while intending to be supportive and loyal, Peter is actually taking a stance against Jesus.

The one who was the foundation stone, is now a stumbling block. A transition that occurs in six sentences; a literary blink of an eye. Rarely has anyone been so right and so wrong at the same time. Bless his heart.

We have a lot to learn from Peter in this instance, because like him, we want so much to be loyal to Jesus; to follow his teachings and do the things he did. But what he taught and did, first and foremost, was obedience to the will of God. And the will of God often times conflicts with what we might see as our own best interests.

We humbly acknowledge like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And we celebrate that in him, we have been reconciled to God; that our sins are forgiven, that the slate has been wiped clean, and that in him we are given new life. That is the truth we celebrate when we stand together and confess our sins in worship.

And we are comforted by that truth. We face life, with all its challenges and heartbreaks, with the firm and certain knowledge that God loves us and feels toward us not anger and disillusionment, but compassion. We rise each day in a world in which that truth is more real than the day before.

But all too often we forget what that means. Like Peter, we are so tantalized by the good part, that we miss the expectations that are put on us; the responsibility that comes with being a saved child of God.

God wills for us that we love and serve one another; that we care for one another. The life God wills for us is life lived in community, not just with God, but with one another. And we can be fine with that as long as it is easy. But then that’s the tricky thing about human beings, right? We don’t always make life together easy. One person forgets to bring in their dog and his barking disturbs their neighbor’s quiet afternoon in the garden. One person wants to carry a weapon to feel safe, and the person behind them in line at the grocery store feels threatened. One person chooses to build on a vacant lot they own, and it means cutting down the trees that have provided shade to the people next door for years.

People are hard to love sometimes. And yet, that’s why God put us all here together. Being disciples that love and serve God by loving and serving one another is hard to do. And even though we know what we’re supposed to do, we often mess it up. Bless our hearts.

In the United States, we have always celebrated that we are a Christian nation. But while we do adore the idea of salvation and eternal life, and there are more Christians in this country than any other country in the world,¹ we are far from a nation that puts into practice what Jesus actually taught and lived. We’re involved in too many conflicts, our immigrant detention centers are too plentiful, our poverty rate is too high, and our animosity towards one another is too common for that to even be true.

Like Peter, we know the words and sometimes we get this “being a disciple” thing right, but often times we don’t. We misunderstand Jesus. Or worse, we ignore him. It’s not just that sometimes we try and fail, it’s that sometimes we fail to even try. Bless our hearts.

But here's the good news in Peter's story. He gets a second chance ... and a third ... and well, as we'll see in the next few weeks, Peter gets a whole lot of extra chances. Jesus shows infinite patience with Peter. Which makes two things perfectly clear:

1. Jesus chooses to build the church on this rock called Peter; on this imperfect, flawed, impetuous rock. And Jesus has used lots of similar rocks to build the church. That means we, as imperfect, flawed, and sometimes impetuous as we are - well, Jesus can use us too.
2. No matter how wrong Peter is, and trust me, as the stories go on we will see Peter make some pretty big mistakes, Jesus remains compassionate; ever the teacher, ever the loving mentor. Jesus never gives up on Peter, or the other disciples, and Jesus won't give up on us, either. Jesus knows who we are and what we are about, and Jesus loves us anyway.

Discerning God's will and trying to live according to that will is challenging. And we will mess-up from time to time. Peter is an icon, and he made mistakes along his faith journey, a bunch of them, just like all of us who followed after him. But what he shows us is that the failure in discipleship is not falling down, it's refusing to get back-up.

So, as we take up this journey of discipleship, may we do so knowing we will likely stumble along the way, but remembering that we will not be the first, nor will our stumbles be the worst. But guided by the Holy Spirit, may we continue on, confident in God's love and compassion and blessing upon us.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Christianity by country - Wikipedia." 6 July 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_by_country#By_country.