

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 9, 2010**

PETER'S BLIND SIDE

Matthew 16:21-28

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Since today is Mothers' Day, I want to give a shout-out to all of you Moms. Some of you are probably familiar with Tony Campolo, the Christian sociologist, author and speaker. I don't agree with his politics on every issue, but I know he loves Jesus, and that means we are brothers in Christ. His children are grown now, but during their growing-up years, when someone would ask Campolo's wife, Peggy, what she did, instead of telling people she was a stay-at-home mom, she would say: "I am socializing two homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation."

When you put it like that, being a mother sounds pretty impressive, doesn't it? Sounds pretty important. And it is! Being a Mom –or a Dad – is a vocation of virtually unparalleled importance. It is not for the faint of heart. Whatever the circumstances of your parenthood or grandparenthood may be, know that the investment you make in the lives of your children or grandchildren is likely to be the most significant thing you ever do. We honor you today, and pray that you will always remember that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Now, let's turn to today's Scripture reading, found in Matthew 16:21-28. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

BLIND-SIDED

Don't you just love Peter? Don't you thank God for Peter? Don't you look at him and think: "If God could use Peter with all his faults, with all his blundering, maybe there is hope for someone like me. Maybe He can use someone like me. If Jesus could change Peter into the rock he ultimately became, maybe He can change people like us, too."

At Youth Group last Sunday, someone referred to Peter as a "doofus." I'm not sure what the technical definition of a "doofus" is (or even if there is one), though I *am* sure it's not a compliment. I think this passage of Scripture in Matthew 16 gives us one example (of several we can find in the New Testament) of just how much of a doofus Peter was.

Last Sunday we looked at Peter's decisive, definitive confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (Matthew 16:16), which, Jesus said, had been revealed to Peter by God Himself (16:17). It was a defining moment in Peter's life. But look what happened next.

“From that time on” – from the time of Peter’s open confession of Jesus’ identity – “Jesus began to explain to His disciples” what would happen to Him in Jerusalem (16:21). There was a sense of divine destiny about it. Jesus *must* go to Jerusalem in order to fulfill the redemptive purpose of His incarnation. This redeeming, saving work was the reason He had come into the world. In verse 21, we have what is called “the first passion prediction.” It is the first time Jesus has spoken openly to His disciples about the suffering He would endure. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record three passion predictions, three separate occasions when Jesus spoke to His disciples about what lay ahead for Him. And all three passion predictions contain specific details of what would happen.

Right here, in verse 21, Jesus says that He would:

1. Go to Jerusalem
2. Suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law (the three groups who made up the Sanhedrin, the powerful ruling council of the Jews)
3. Be killed
4. Be raised to life on the third day.

Right on the heels of Peter’s confession, Jesus was telling the disciples that His messiahship involved suffering. It would result in His rejection and death. And, though the disciples didn’t get it, He spoke of His resurrection, too. The “mustness” of all these things was not due to some kind of impersonal fate or determinism. It was due to the willing submission of the Son to the Father’s plan.

Peter was just blown away by this talk of suffering and death. He was blind-sided by it. He never saw it coming.

If you’re into football, a quarterback (QB) is blind-sided when he gets hit from behind by a defensive player he doesn’t see coming. Since most QBs are right-handed, their blind side is to their left. To protect the QB, most NFL teams invest a lot of money in their left tackle. It is his job to keep defensive players from hitting the QB on his blind side. Left tackles are so valuable that on average they earn more money than running backs and wide receivers, more than linebackers and safeties, more than any other position except QB. *The Blind Side*, the movie with Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw, which I’m sure many of you have seen, tells the moving story of a young African-American named Michael Oher (played by Quinton Aaron), who is adopted by a white Christian family in Memphis, TN. Michael develops into an outstanding college football player at Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi), and now plays left tackle for the Baltimore Ravens of the NFL, where it is his job, among other things, to protect the blind side of his QB Joe Flacco.

When Jesus began to explain to the disciples what His messiahship involved, for Peter, it was like taking a hit on his blind side. It knocked him off balance. And he had a strong reaction, didn’t he? He actually started to rebuke Jesus (16:22). He said: “Never, Lord! No way! You’re wrong! It is not going to happen!”

The incongruity of it all is obvious, isn't it? Here is Peter, having expressed his belief in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, now presuming to correct Jesus. He speaks to Jesus as if he knows God's will better than the Son of God Himself. He thinks he has a better plan for Jesus than Jesus does. He is trying, in effect, to save the Savior from what he (Peter) considers to be an unacceptable plan.

For Peter, and, more than likely, for the other disciples as well, the idea of a Messiah who suffers and dies is unimaginable. It is unthinkable. It simply did not fit with their conception of how it would be when the Savior showed up on the scene. Peter really believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He really believed that Jesus was the Son of God. His faith was real. But it was not complete. There were still a lot of things Peter didn't know or understand. He made the mistake of thinking that because he knew who Jesus was, he knew everything else, too. He thought he had it all figured out, and proceeded to try to tell Jesus that He (Jesus) had gotten it wrong.

Do you know people like that – who feel obliged to correct God? Do you sometimes think you know better than God what He should do? Do you sometimes think you have a better plan than God? Don't we all? His ways are not our ways – and it's a good thing, isn't it? We may have good intentions, just as Peter did in his attempt to correct the Son of God. But the unintended consequences of our best-intentioned plans can be catastrophic.

FROM A ROCK TO A STUMBLING BLOCK

Jesus, we see in verse 23, didn't take Peter's rebuke lying down. He spoke severely to Peter. He called him a tool of Satan. Peter, in the space of just a few verses, had gone from being a rock (16:18) to a stumbling block to Jesus. The word translated "stumbling block" is the Greek word *scandalon*. To suggest that Jesus did not have to suffer and die, to offer Jesus a kingship without suffering, was a stumbling block to Jesus and showed that Peter had unwittingly become a tool of the devil. Without realizing it, Peter had become a "devil's advocate."

It really bothers me when a fellow Christian plays the role of a devil's advocate! Please don't do it. The devil doesn't need any more advocates. He has way more than enough already. I know when people use the term, "devil's advocate," most of the time they don't mean it literally. I still don't think we should use the term. It is never appropriate for a follower of Christ to play the role of a devil's advocate. Even though, like Peter, we do sometimes. If you are tempted to be the devil's advocate, don't do it!

Peter's suggestion that Jesus didn't have to suffer must have reminded Jesus of how Satan in the wilderness temptations had offered Him a way to have a crown without the cross (Matthew 4:8-9). Peter wasn't thinking God's thoughts here. He was being used by the devil.

You and I need to be very careful, because the devil will use us, too, if we let him. But we don't need to let him. We are not powerless to deal with the devil. If we resist him, the Bible says, he will flee from us (James 4:7). If we put on the armor of God, we will be able to stand

firm and strong against him (Ephesians 6:10-18), and we will not become his tools unwittingly.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

After putting Peter in his place – which is something Peter needed – Jesus talked to the disciples about the way of the cross. Listen to His words again in verses 24-26: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be if you gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?”

Dear friends, the world is full of people who have sold their souls in their pursuit of wealth or fame or power or pleasure. They have made living for themselves their chief end in life. But Jesus says that road is a dead-end. I grieve for Ben Roethlisberger – the quarterback for my Pittsburgh Steelers – because I fear that he has sold his soul and lost his moral compass. Pundits debate whether or not he can redeem himself and resurrect his image. I’m sure there are a lot of things Ben can do to change the public perception of him. But the truth is that he cannot redeem himself. No one can. There is One, however, who *can* redeem him and make him a new person on the inside. Which, I believe, is what Ben needs more than anything.

What Jesus is saying here is that if you want to follow Him, if you want to be His disciple not in name only but in reality, you have to renounce yourself. You have to say no to self and yes to God. You have to remove yourself from the throne in your life and enthrone God there. You need to make God and His concerns the central reality, the central focus, the central object of your life.

Then you need to take up your cross and follow Him. Sometimes we talk about some trouble or hardship, some difficult situation or relationship in our lives as being our “cross to bear.” I’m afraid that we sometimes dishonor our Savior by equating our light and momentary troubles in life with His sacrifice on the cross. I have chronic headaches every single day. It’s not fun. I wish they would go away. I wish God would choose to heal me. But my headaches are not a cross to bear. They are just a part of life. Arthritis can be terribly painful, but it is not what Jesus had in mind when He said we should take up our cross and follow Him. Having a boss you don’t like or an in-law who is overbearing isn’t pleasant, but it is not the same as carrying a cross, which was a symbol of the worst kind of humiliation and suffering.

Cross-bearing involves saying no to yourself. Cross-bearing involves embracing the values of Jesus, even when you’re misunderstood or you get criticized for it. Cross-bearing involves following Jesus, even when it is not popular. Cross-bearing involves being willing to suffer, if necessary, for the sake of Jesus. And even to give up your life.

It is not an easy, carefree life. Jesus never said it would be. But no one is a doofus who renounces self and says yes to God, who takes up his/her cross and follows Jesus day after day. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.