

Time to Turn-off the “Mute” Button!

[Text - Matthew 16:13-25]

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In this morning’s New Testament reading, Simon Peter quickly goes from being a solid rock upon whose profession of faith Jesus is prepared to build the Church, to being a stumbling block who Jesus sharply rebukes. One minute, he’s being praised for his Divine insight into Jesus’ identity; and the next, Jesus tells him, “Step back, Satan....for you are setting your mind, not on Divine things, but on human concerns.” It’s hard to imagine how a rock-solid “Saint” can be re-tagged as a sinister “Satan” in such short order; but maybe that’s because of how we sometimes misconstrue those two titles.

Theologically, a *Saint* is anyone whose life is grounded and guided by Divine Love and Grace; and *Satan* is one who tries to pull people away from trusting in that Love and Grace. That was the role of Satan in much of the ancient Hebrew literature - the *tempter*, who seeks to lure the faithful from trusting in the Holy One. And apparently, this is the dynamic at work in today’s reading.

Simon has been following Jesus for some time. And like many others, he observes that there’s something remarkably different in the way that Jesus teaches, touches, and transforms the people around him. Jesus speaks with a confident, yet compassionate authority about Divine love and forgiveness; and he shows a tremendous commitment to raising-up the oppressed, and graciously touching society’s so-called “untouchables”. By doing so, Jesus boldly challenges the status quo, and bravely confronts the powerful religious authorities of his day. There’s definitely something extraordinary about Jesus, which prompts considerable conjecture about who he might actually be.

Some are saying, “He’s another John the Baptist - a challenger of the mighty and a champion of the meek!”

Others say, “He’s certainly of the same mold as Jeremiah or one of the other ancient prophets!”

There are even those who speculate that Jesus is Elijah himself, returning to swoop into Jerusalem with a chariot of fire and drive out the Roman oppressors!

This is all extremely flattering! However, Jesus is less interested in public opinion polls, than he is with the perceptions of those closest to him. So he asks his disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Simon professes, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Now that is a stunning and sensational statement! To declare that Jesus is *The* Messiah [or in Greek, the *Christ*], is to claim that he is the One to whom the prophets of old and John the Baptist were all pointing - the Anointed Child of God, who will usher-in God's Eternal Reign of Justice and Peace. And Jesus doesn't deny it! In fact, he complements Simon and calls him *Petros* - the Rock, saying, "Rocky, you've got it right! This is who I am, and this is the foundation upon which I will build my Church - a compassionate community so strong that even the powers of Hell will not prevail against it." And *then...* Jesus "sternly orders his followers...to tell *no one* that he is the Christ!"

Wow! That is one bizarre plot twist! Jesus stirs-up this discussion about who he is; gets his disciples all fired-up about it; and then tells them, "Let's keep this quiet!" No doubt, Jesus has his reasons; and Simon Peter quickly reveals what one of those reasons might be. Like many people in First Century Israel, Peter, believes that the Messiah will come storming-in with tremendous power to punish the *bad* people [who were, of course, their enemies], and to reward the *good* people [who were, of course, themselves!] Yet Jesus' understanding of his role as the Messiah is radically different. Jesus comes, not to dramatically stir-up revolution in the streets, but to peacefully establish compassion in the hearts of all people. And he recognizes that within *all* our hearts, there is both good and bad, faith and doubt, liberating love and debilitating fear.

Jesus chooses to trust in the Power of Divine Love to transform people's hearts and lives. Yet he knows that challenging and changing people with unconditional love, can be far more daring and dangerous than confronting them with coercive force. And he also wants his followers to know the risks involved. So, "Jesus begins to show the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised. But Peter takes him aside and rebukes him saying, 'God forbid it! This must never happen to you.' But Jesus says 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 concerns.'"

Jesus is confident in trusting that Divine Love and Grace is the way to truly change people's lives; but Peter chooses to listen instead to his own doubts and fears. So Saint Peter behaves more like Satan - a tempter, who tries to pull Jesus away from that path of self-giving faith, and onto the path of self-protecting fear. This doesn't mean that Peter is a bad person; it means that he is like every one of us, whenever we allow our fears to override our faith. For example, when you or I encounter someone in need, our willingness to get involved often depends upon whether we listen to our *fears*, or to our *faith*. My fears tell me, "I could help this person, but that might leave me in a pinch.... I'd like to offer my support, but I've got my own problems to deal with....I've done this kind of thing before and have been taken advantage of - not this time!" However, when I listen to the voice of Faith, and truly trust that any encounter contains a Divinely positive potential, I will take the chance of getting involved. When I remember that God has blessed me with far more than I need, and I trust that my Divine, Originating Source is present, then I'll take that step of faith, and be fully present and gracious to the people before me.

You and I *can* listen to our fears - carefully guarding our time, our resources, and our lives. Unfortunately, by doing so, we miss-out on so much of Life, and Life's amazing possibilities. Our desire to not be "taken-in" by others, becomes our reality, as we shut ourselves off to those around us - avoiding the fearful risks, but missing the fantastic rewards of living fully and freely as God's faithful Children.

Jesus puts it this way: “Those who try to save [or cling to] their life will lose it; but those who lose their life for my sake [my purpose of reconciling people and God] will find true life!” For Jesus, these are much more than words. Jesus lives his life, and *gives* his life, trusting that the Divine Source of all Life is ultimately in charge, and truly desires that this entire Creation be in harmony. So in spite of the discord and dangers that surround him, Jesus centers his life on Divine peace and wholeness - which allows him to convey that peace and wholeness to others. And that can also be the same for you and me today. As you and I put our faith in the Good News that Jesus Christ reveals, we become true partners in Christ’s healing and redeeming work in this world.

That sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? But here’s the kicker: When you and I chose faith over fear, love rather than indifference - the potential for rejection and pain in our own lives actually increases! Yet so does the potential for genuine wholeness, meaning and joy - for us and for those around us. Jesus feeds the hungry, heals the sick, raises-up the oppressed, and embraces all people. And it’s his insistence upon this kind of Divinely Inclusive Compassion, that leads the controlling religious and political leaders to have him crucified! Fortunately, Jesus doesn’t lose faith - he doesn’t give-up his mission or message as the Christ - because he trusts that the endless power of Divine Love will ultimately triumph over the forces of fear, and darkness, and even death. As the Rising Light and Empty Tomb of Easter reveal, Jesus Christ has it right!

So, what this means for you and me today is this: Jesus’ command, that his followers “tell no one that he is the Christ” has officially been revoked! It is now O.K. to speak-up! In fact, you and I are highly encouraged to boldly proclaim - and reveal - the Christ of Love, and the Love of Christ!

A perfect love that casts out all fear;

An extravagant love that welcomes all people;

An eternal love, that overcomes despair, doubt, and death;

A rock-solid love, upon which the Church is built, and upon which you and I can securely build our entire lives!

As the Church, it is now our wonderful privilege and responsibility to crank-up the volume! To joyfully tell the people around us this tremendous, life-changing Good News! So let's get busy and do it!