

***Do It Anyway***  
by Rev. Durrell Watkins 8/31/08  
Sunshine Cathedral  
Matthew 16.21-28

When I was a child, my mother used to sing a song that kind of got stuck in my head. I never heard anyone else sing it, but my mother wasn't a composer, so I know she learned it somewhere. I don't know who wrote it. I think it was called "Follow Me." The words were:

*I traveled down the lonely road and no one seemed to care.  
The burden on my weary back had led me to despair.  
I oft complained to Jesus how folks were treating me.  
And then I heard him say so tenderly —  
My feet were oh so weary upon that Calvary road  
The cross became so heavy I fell beneath the load.  
Be faithful weary Christian the morning thou shalt see.  
Pick up your cross and follow close to me.*

Matthew tells us this morning that Jesus starts sharing with his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer greatly and even risk death. But death will somehow be followed by victory, strange as that may seem.

Peter is having none of it. He says, "God forbid that you should suffer any harm. It'll never happen."

And Jesus goes berserk. He calls Peter Satan. He snaps at Peter, "Get away from me; you're getting in the way." And that seems like a strange rebuke. Peter didn't want anything bad to happen to his friend; does that really justify being called "Satan"?

But here's the thing. Matthew isn't recording this as it happens. Jesus is killed in about the year 29 AD. Matthew is writing about 56 years later, and about 15 years after Rome has decimated Jerusalem and its Temple. So Matthew isn't predicting the future; he's trying to make sense of the past that has led to his present.

Secondly, if we read ahead, Matthew will tell us why Jerusalem is a powerful symbol for him. He has Jesus say in chapter 23: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you...*

For Matthew, Jerusalem is the city where prophets are killed. By having Jesus declare that he must go to Jerusalem and by having him become supremely annoyed when someone suggests that he shouldn't is Matthew's way of saying that Jesus is a true prophet, a God-filled person who speaks the very word of God. It is part of Matthew's argument that Jesus was the messiah. So this dramatic exchange is used by Matthew to affirm Jesus' significance.

Jesus was killed by the Romans, and four decades later the Romans destroyed our holy city...why should we follow the way of this Jesus? And Matthew spends 28 chapters telling his community why they should follow the way of Jesus; why the story of Jesus remains applicable to their lives. Why should we follow the Jesus Way? And Matthew spends 28 chapters telling his folks, "Here's why."

We're more than half way through the gospel now, so the tension is building and is leading to a very grand and optimistic conclusion. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's stay with chapter 16 for today.

Of all the things to call Peter, why does Jesus choose "Satan"? There are at least two reasons...

The first is dramatic irony. Matthew is putting together a narrative here. He needs it to hold our attention. And we know that just a few sentences earlier Peter said to Jesus, "You are the messiah, the one chosen by the living God" and Jesus responds, "Bless you, Simon son of Jonah...you are Peter, that is, a Rock, the very Rock upon which I can build a movement."

High praise from Jesus for Peter! So it is ironic, dramatic, puzzling to have Jesus just 6 sentences later tell the Blessed Rock that he is actually Satan and needs to get out of his way!

I don't know if that's good theology, but its darn sure good story-telling! And that means it will keep Matthew's audience's attention, and they will continue listening to the story to see how it resolves itself. To learn why the Jesus story should be part of our story we have to keep listening, so Matthew makes sure we will. Matthew is no dummy.

There may be a second reason for calling Peter "Satan." The first time we ever bump into the character called "Satan" is in the book of Job. Job is written centuries before Jesus, and the story is a drama about a tribal chieftain who goes from riches to rags in the twinkling of an eye. And one of the reasons for his sudden misfortune is that someone in the heavenly court, in Hebrew called "ha satan" (the satan or "the accuser") challenges God.

The satan, or the accuser is like a prosecuting attorney; his job is to accuse. In the story he has free access to God and the heavenly court and he doesn't even seem to be terribly mischievous; he's just doing his job of making accusations.

His accusation about Job is that God has given him preferential treatment and if his luck turned from good to bad, his character would turn from good to bad. Inexplicably God accepts the challenge and Job's life becomes an instant mess.

Over the centuries, "the satan" evolved into Satan...from a cosmic job to a proper name, and the Persians probably influenced that. But before Satan is the boogey-man, ha satan, the satan, is the accuser who tries to deny that Job is who he really is.

Jesus going to Jerusalem is symbolic of his role as a prophet of God, God's chosen one. By saying that can't happen, Matthew is having Peter deny Jesus' prophetic character. He's playing the role that ha satan played in the story of Job.

Well, once Jesus bites Peter's head off, he then tells his disciples, "Yes, we've seen people healed and lives restored and people who are mentally tormented have found peace. But not everyone likes what we're doing, and to make a difference in the lives of the oppressed means that the oppressors might come after us."

We can share in the glory, but we may have to share in the cost, too. We may actually have to work harder, spend more, try again, lose status or privilege. The tomb can't hold us in, but that doesn't mean we won't spend three days in it! We get the glory, but we also share the cost.

Crucifixion was a common practice of the Romans and the Babylonians before them. It was meant not only to make the victim suffer but also to terrorize a community so that they wouldn't challenge the Empire, the status quo. To take up the cross isn't a prediction of Jesus' death, it may not even be a reference to the death he experienced; it seems to be a warning that if you take on the Empire the Empire may well strike back. But do it anyway.

**Peter didn't want Jesus to live into his powerful prophetic role...but he did it anyway. And following Jesus may involve some risk, but he says, "Do it anyway."**

**Yes — we are called to stand up to the forces of homophobia and homohatred. Not everyone will like that we are doing it. Jesus says, "Do it anyway."**

**Yes — we are called to challenge racism and sexism, and injustice wherever it occurs and not everyone will like that, not even everyone in our community will like that. Jesus says, "Do it anyway."**

**Yes — we are called to follow the Prince of Peace even when discord is the order of the day. Not everyone will like talk of peace. Jesus says, "Do it anyway."**

**Yes — we are called to offer hope to the hopeless. Some people will say a message of indomitable hope and unyielding optimism is unrealistic pie-in-the-sky. Jesus says, "Do it anyway."**

**Yes — we are called to teach principles of faithfulness, of study and prayer and worship and generous giving, and some people will say we are being fanatical or that we expect too much. Their criticisms may sting, but Jesus says, "Do it anyway."**

**Chapter 16 ends by saying there were some in Matthew's community, in the year 85 AD who would not die before seeing Chosen One coming in glory. And then in chapter 17, they see him coming in glory on the mount of Transfiguration.**

**We can do amazing things. We can be agents of healing and hope and peace and goodwill. We can be miracle workers, but not everyone will like it. We'll do it anyway. Will pick up the cross and follow in the way of Jesus, and as we do that, we will encounter the very glory of Christ in our own lives. And that light will shine in, through, and among us and will continue sharing the light with the world.**

**It's not always easy. But is always possible; and it is always worth it. This is the good news. Amen.**

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**I embrace the power of hope today.  
I share the power of hope today.  
I behold the glory of Christ today.  
The light of Christ shines on me today.  
I am blessed.  
And I bless others. Amen.**