

Matthew 16.21-28

Long before *Trivial Pursuit* hit the market, Milton Bradley's *Go to the Head of the Class* filled the niche for family-friendly trivia games. Do you know it? There's a board set up to look like a classroom, and players start out in kindergarten and move up through the grades by correctly answering questions ranging from "How many legs does a spider have?" to "Who said 'All the world's a stage'?" I confess that I may have had the wrong idea about the game, because in the off-season I read through the quiz book trying to memorize all the answers. To be clear, I wasn't trying to cheat—I just thought, in all my naiveté, that that's where knowledge about the world comes from. That knowing the right answers to things was the path to success.

But just last week, Peter had his "Go to the head of the class" moment. You know Peter, right? Class clown, voted most likely to walk off the fishing dock without looking? Over the course of Matthew's gospel, Peter has shown amazing faith and resilience and has also—there is really no other way to say this—been a total knucklehead. So in last week's gospel lesson, it was both completely unsurprising and a minor miracle that Peter blurts out the right answer to Jesus' non-trivial question: "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Part of the reason this is remarkable is that they are standing in Caesarea Philippi, where Herod the Great had erected several small temples to Caesar Augustus, known as "Divi filius" or the son of God. Peter's confession is not just making a claim about Jesus; he is making that claim against a powerful ruling emperor. While Jewish people enjoyed broad religious tolerance under Rome, that tolerance probably did not extend to blaspheming Caesar. Peter's faith is undeniable, and thus it is that Jesus promises to found his church on this solid rock (you probably already know the name Peter is a pun on rock) and to give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

But, just as I suggested earlier, knowing the right answers to things is not necessarily the path to wisdom or success. Today's gospel lesson picks up immediately after Peter's confession, with Jesus beginning to chart just exactly how different from Caesar his Messiah-ship will be. "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."

If people have been hoping for a deliverance from oppression, this is not the kind of power play they have been expecting. “On the contrary,” the Salt Project explains, “Jesus opposes self-centered, domineering, grasping forms of power. But his mode of opposition isn’t armed with a sword; he has in mind a deeper physics, a more subversive kind of resistance to the powers that be. After all, the opposite of a grasping, violent fist isn’t a bigger fist, but rather an open, loving hand. Jesus will lead a revolution—but a revolution of love, service, and justice. On the surface, he will suffer and be rejected. On the surface, he will at last submit to the ultimate imperial instrument of cruelty and intimidation, the Roman cross. On the surface, he will be defeated—but God’s deeper physics will prevail. After three days, he will rise again, and a movement called to love, service, and justice will be born.”

“God forbid!” Peter’s reaction is sharp and immediate. His rebuke, though, isn’t just disappointment in Jesus’ lack of a plan to lead an imperial uprising. Peter genuinely loves Jesus and responds as, I think, any of us would to the knowledge that someone we love might be killed.

So we also need to be careful how we hear Jesus’ reply. The Hebrew word “Satan” has long been associated by Christians with the devil, the epitome of evil. But we’ll have a more nuanced view of this passage, as well as the Book of Job, if we understand that it means, simply, Adversary. Satan as we understand him is an adversary, but not the only adversary. Peter here is more of a garden-variety speed bump: “Get behind me, Adversary. Follow me. Come after me. Let *me* lead *you*. You don’t quite have the picture yet.

I’m sure those words also stung, which is why I’m selfishly glad that we have Peter as a proxy for our own knuckleheaded misunderstandings. Jesus does not have to tell us *directly*, “You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Even if we do go to the head of the class, the answers we’ve memorized tend deal with human things. We can know scripture backward and forward and still not be with the program.

How do you know you’re setting your mind on divine things rather than on human things? It is all too easy to confuse our own ideas of imperial glory for the kind of opposition Jesus heralds. We can cheer on the expansion

of the Christian brand without thinking carefully about what that brand stands for, or whether it has much to do at all with Jesus and his teaching.

Matt Skinner at the *Working Preacher* podcast asks: at what point do we say, “This is harmful” rather than “we’re just different kinds of Christians”? Where is the line? When Christian Nationalism conflates God and country to the point that country is God, we may be sure that we have crossed it.

On the other hand, we can hear “take up your cross” and interpret it as a call to self-erasure or, worse, as the reason someone else should put up with oppression and abuse. I won’t often say a particular theology or interpretation is wrong, because I think the church and its leaders ought to be humble in the face of our differences, but I think both Christian triumphalism AND demands for others to sacrifice themselves are actively injurious.

Yes, Jesus says “Take up your cross and follow me” —and it’s true that the way Jesus is headed may lead us to risk, suffering, and death. A revolution of love and justice is not welcomed by lovers of power and injustice. But in the larger picture, Jesus is addressing the Christian community, not individuals on a mission from God. We the church are called to carry our cross into one another’s joyful block parties and grieving homes, distressed neighborhoods and peaceful corners. We are invited to share each other’s burdens *and* each other’s hopes. We are beckoned onto this pathway, not to know the right answers or to *earn* our salvation but because it *is* our salvation to be the beloved community together.

So Augustus Caesar may claim the title Divi filius. Caesar may claim all the titles he wants, but what will it profit him to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Whoever wants most to save their own skin will inevitably lose it, while those who live toward a deeper purpose will, in fact, find their lives. Christ’s “deeper physics” shows that cruelty and intimidation will not prevail. Death will not prevail. Only grace, mercy, love, embodied and incarnate, will prevail. These are the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Amen.