

“Divine Things and Human Things”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum
September 19, 2021

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:27-38)

I have to admit that, when I read this gospel story, I feel kind of sorry for Peter. In the beginning, he sets himself apart from all the others. He gives the perfect answer to the question – and I do mean THE QUESTION – the one Jesus asks of every disciple, “Who do you say that I am?” In just a few words the apostle Peter proves himself to be both prophet and historian, connecting with uncommon vision and wisdom the treasured teachings of the past and the fast-moving intensity of the present. He proclaims clearly to Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” Gold star, Peter. Take your place at the head of the class.

And then, in a blink of an eye, Jesus is calling him “Satan.” Admittedly, the jarring pivot had to be confusing. The image of Messiah is one of victory, authority, glory, and power, but the image of the Cross is one of defeat, subservience, shame, and weakness. It didn’t make sense to Peter. They were talking about Jesus being the Messiah, not dying a humiliating death. So, Peter calls a quick time out and pulls Jesus aside. We are not told exactly what Peter mutters to him, but a pretty good guess is something like “What in the heck are you talking about Jesus?”

However, our translation tells us only that Peter “rebuked” Jesus. That may be, but the Greek word here is complicated. *Epitimaó* (ἐπιτιμάω) can mean “to admonish,” “to warn,” or “to rebuke,” but it can also mean “to esteem,” “to honor,” or “to value,”¹ and I think that is more likely what Peter was doing. I think Peter was trying to lift Jesus up, not put him down. I think Peter was following the better angels of his nature. Jesus was talking about political and religious persecution, suffering, and death. It pained Peter to hear his

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/2008.htm>



friend talking this way. Peter refused to accept that these things might actually come to pass, that the Messiah could walk a path so dark and deadly.

Despite Peter's good intentions, Jesus responds with a firm public shaming. And, as he chastises the apostle, Jesus introduces what I believe is one of the most intriguing dichotomies in the New Testament. It's right up there with darkness and light, sin and grace, goats and sheep. It is the distinction between "divine things" and "human things."

Back when I was in college, Spike Lee's movie "Do The Right Thing" took the nation by storm. In the scene that gave the film its name, a street-smart sage known as the "Mayor," who also happened to be the neighborhood drunk, tries to impart some wisdom to Mookie, the young black man played by Lee. The racial strain on the block was exploding, and no one could figure out how to solve the problems. In the midst of the confusion, the Mayor's advice to Mookie was simple. "Always do the right thing," he says.

"That's it?" Mookie asks.

"That's it."

The problem with that advice is obvious. Of course it is best to do the right thing. But how are we supposed to know what the right thing is? In the midst of the confusing mess of human life, the right thing doesn't always shine out like a diamond in the mud. Often, we are left too root around blindly, hoping that we might get lucky and somehow pull a gem out of the mire.

That same frustration bubbles up when I hear Jesus admonish Peter. "You should have been thinking about divine things." OK, I get that. But is it really that simple?

In a way, it is. Paul starts us off with a good list in Galatians 5, where he writes that *"the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, [and] carousing."* Those are clearly human things; certainly **not** divine.

And then there are the fruits of the Spirit, which we would rightly call divine: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*² And it is certainly good to fix our minds on these divine attributes, something that Paul also reminded his beloved Philippians, saying that *"whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*³

But isn't that exactly what Peter was doing? Was he not leading with love, wanting to protect Jesus from harm? Was he not pursuing peace, trying to keep Jesus out of trouble? Doesn't it seem that he was trying to be faithful to his friend, and could we not say that his well-meaning concern was commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise? Because we are made in the image of God, things that we consider divine are in fact implanted in us. They are imperfect in us, they are broken and flawed in us, they are kind of jumbled and mixed up in us, but they are there. There are traces of divine things in human things.

You know Christmas will be here before we know it, and it will bring with it all the beloved Christmas specials – ones that have been around for decades but somehow never get old. I love all of them, even the obscure ones like "Nestor, the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey." Do any of you remember that one? Romeo Muller wrote the script, and Rankin

² Galatians 5:22-23.

³ Philippians 4:8.

Bass made it into a stop motion special. Little Nestor is a sweet little donkey, but he has long ears. His ears not only make him the butt of jokes and ridicule; they also get him into trouble, even when he hasn't done anything wrong. One night, when little Nestor causes his owner a great loss, again by no fault of his own, the angry owner tosses him out into the darkness into a blinding snowstorm. His mother, refusing to be separated from her son, crashes her way out of the barn and somehow finds him in the storm. They huddle together against the storm.

The next morning, the storm has passed and the snow has stopped, and little Nestor wakes to a bright sun. He calls to his mother, but there is no answer. He soon realizes that the only reason he survived the night was that his mother covered his little body with her own. She gave her own life to save his. It's just a story, but it gets me every time.

A similar story comes out of South Wales about a young mother and her child who were overtaken by a similar blizzard. When they didn't reach their destination, a search party went out. All they could find was a mound of snow. As they shoveled the snow away, they found a woman who had taken off all of her outer clothing and wrapped it around her baby. She was clearly dead. But when they moved her body and unwrapped the child, they were amazed to find him clinging to life. That little boy lived, and years later that little child, whose name was David Lloyd George, became prime minister of Great Britain.

No one knows if that really happened. Maybe it did. Maybe it didn't. Maybe Romeo Muller knew of that legend when he wrote the story of Nestor the Long-Eared Donkey. Maybe he didn't. Maybe it's all just a story... but that doesn't mean it isn't true. If it didn't speak a deep truth, then why does it get us every time?

These are the diamonds that we sometimes find in the muck and mire of human experience... divine things, like the sacrificial love a parent has for a child... the kind of love that, when it sees a beloved child in pain, would gladly do whatever it takes to stop that pain or prevent it from happening. Would we not say that such a love must be divine, at least in part?

So, the question remains: Why is Jesus so harsh to Peter?

I think the answer, like so many other answers, is somehow found in the cross. The love that Peter was offering to Jesus was genuine, but in this case, it was not divine. There was something missing, and that something was the thing that Peter and the disciples would have to see, the truth that we too must somehow accept. To be the Messiah, it seems, carries a weight and obligation that was not fully understood either in the Old Testament or in the human experience. Why else would Jesus pivot so aggressively from the glory of Peter's correct identification of Jesus as the Messiah to the deep darkness of his suffering, and the inevitability of his cross?

Like all of us, Peter bore enough of the image of God within him to know the value of divine things – things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Peter knew the inherent goodness and even the glory of those things. But what Peter did not know was how the cross would irrevocably alter our understanding of those things. He couldn't possibly have known because he had not yet seen the full extent of God's love – a love that would sacrifice everything for the object of that love. Yes, Peter knew joy, but he did not know the joy that is only felt when that which once seemed insurmountable – something like death -- is somehow overcome. Peter had experienced peace, kindness, generosity and faithfulness, but he had never seen it or felt it as it was about to be seen and felt. Jesus needed Peter to know there was more.

And Jesus also needed Peter to know that he would never fully experience those good things, those true fruits of the Spirit, unless and until Peter himself was willing to pick up his own cross and follow the faithful path that he was about to watch Jesus walk.

Today, as we begin a new year of Sunday School, and adult education, and confirmation, and youth group and all the things we do as the church, we rightly celebrate all of these very good things. It is right to feel joy and hope, and it is right for us to feel faithful as we open it all up again. It feels like we are doing the right thing. But as we begin these things, this jarring story of Jesus and Peter reminds us of what is at stake. Will these be human things, or divine things?

As we dare to stretch our vision higher, we start by recognizing and acknowledging the cavernous gulf that exists between the complete divinity of Jesus and the very partial, blurry, and broken image of divinity that lives in us. We know love, but we do not know divine love. We make attempts at faithfulness, but we have no idea what divine faithfulness requires. As the psalmist says, “such knowledge is too wonderful for [us]; it is so high that [we] cannot attain it.”⁴ Gazing across this cavernous divide, standing in the shadow of the cross that changes everything, the church most often falls back on a song ...

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! ...
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul?*

*My song is love unknown, My Savior's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake, my Lord should take frail flesh, and die?*

But that, it seems, is not enough. It is not enough for us just to think about Christ's sacrificial love, or even to be awed by Christ's sacrificial love. We are not called just to marvel at Christ's cross. Somehow, we are supposed to try and pick one up as well. We may feel like we are mired in the mud, but we are still called to try and pull some diamonds out of it. We are called to realize that the sacrificial love of the cross is not just something Jesus does, but something every would-be follower of Jesus must try to do as well.

We will not do this perfectly. We all fall short every day, even every hour. Fortunately for us, God does not expect us to be divine, at least not on this side of heaven. But we are called to set our minds on things that are divine. We are called to look over and above merely human things, and fix our gaze on divine things. And, for us, nothing is truly divine unless it has been touched, claimed, and transformed by the sacrificial love of the cross.

If we can set our minds to that, I expect that, every now and then, we look down and realize that we have pulled a diamond out of the mud... that we will have done not only the right thing, but a divine thing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Psalm 139:6.