

**HE STILL PUTS UP WITH US**  
Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church  
16 Pentecost, Matthew 16:21-27, Year A  
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Well, it's that time of the year that many husbands look forward to and many wives dread—football season. In some homes, football season has a dramatic impact on the family unit and routine. Some men plan their weekend activities such as lawn work, golf and family time around the Saturday college line up and Sunday professional games. Some are so fanatical about football season that they purchase TiVo and similar recording programs so they can record games while they are watching another one.

Admittedly, I enjoy football season as well. Though I don't have the time to spend the whole weekend watching games, and wouldn't if I could, I still enjoy watching them. Speaking of which, did any of you catch the Alabama/Clemson game last night?

I like watching professional and college highlights from past seasons as well. I even enjoy watching those retrospectives of famous football bloopers. I watched one not long ago featuring the Minnesota Vikings. The show was entitled "NFL's 100 Greatest Follies." The blooper in question occurred on October 25, 1964, at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco, California during a contest with the 49ers. Vikings defensive end Jim Marshall, pursuing a scrambling 49ers quarterback from behind, recovered a fumble and ran with it in the same direction he had been pursuing the play—toward his own end zone. In other words, he ran the wrong way. Marshall sprinted down the field alone, his teammates unable to get his attention over the course of 66 yards. When he reached the end zone, Marshall made like a softball pitcher and underhanded the ball well into the

stands, to celebrate the touchdown he believed he had just scored. Marshall was bewildered when 49ers center Bruce Bosley arrived in the end zone and said “Thanks, Jim.” Suddenly, Marshall bent over and held his head in his hands, realizing finally what he had just done.

When asked what people ask him most about that play, Marshall said “The number one question is, ‘I’ve always wondered what you thought at that moment?’ And I say, ‘Think of the worst thing you’ve ever done — the thing you’re most ashamed of — and it was seen by 80 million people. Then think of people coming up to you and reminding you of it for the rest of your life. That gives you a sense of what I’ve gone through.’”

In reality, among Viking fans, Jim Marshall is still remembered as one of the best defensive ends the Vikings ever had. Despite that horrible gaffe, Marshall went on to play a great game. Yet, other than Viking fans, few people remember his storied accomplishments on the gridiron. He isn’t remembered for playing in 282 consecutive games in his twenty years in the NFL, 270 of those with the Vikings, not to mention his 29 fumble recoveries. Instead, Marshall will always be remembered as “Wrong way Marshall.” This probably accounts for why he’ll never forget the day he went from hero to goat in less than a minute.<sup>1</sup>

The Apostle Peter could probably identify with Jim Marshall. In last week’s

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Blake Rohrer for the idea of using the story about Jim Marshall as an illustration from his sermon in *Lectionary Homiletics*, August-September, 2008. However, Rohrer’s date and location of the infamous game is incorrect in his sermon. The game was played on October 25, 1964 at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. Marshall’s quote came from a July 20, 2001 article from Scout.com. and is located at <http://min.scout.com/2/11652.html>.

gospel lesson, Jesus asked his disciples “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” He then followed with the more pointed question, “Who do you say that I am?” If you recall, it was Peter who raised his hand first and declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus was so impressed with Peter’s confession that he called Peter the rock on which the church would be built.

Then Jesus proceeds to tell the disciples what will happen after he gets to their destination of Jerusalem. He tells them that after he gets there, he will suffer, be killed, and then be raised from the dead. This is not what his disciples expected to hear, especially Peter. Unable to even conceive the reality of what Jesus is telling them, Peter says, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” (Matthew 16:22).

In Peter’s spontaneous response to Jesus’ sobering news, Peter, much like Jim Marshall, ends up running the wrong way. Just as quickly as Jesus called Peter the rock on which the church is built, Jesus now calls him Satan, in response to Peter’s denial of Jesus’ plan to be killed in Jerusalem.

It makes sense, however, for Peter to feel the way he did. This is because in Peter’s mind Jesus was Israel’s vision of the Messiah—a second David who had come to restore Israel to its glory days as the powerful chosen people of God. He could not conceive of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb.

However, Peter’s Messianic ideas and Jesus’ understanding of the same were totally different. Jesus did not come as a Davidic warrior to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. He was indeed the Suffering Servant who came to usher in a new Kingdom—beginning with the cost of his own life. Peter simply couldn’t reconcile this in his own mind.

Peter's gaffe was not specific to him. In many ways, he's the archetype of every Christian. Like with Peter, at some point we think we have a clear understanding of who Jesus is and of our relationship with him. Then something happens that causes us to lose our faith, or shatters our confidence in our understanding of God. Or, we simply choose to go our own way, driven by the sin of pride and as Jesus said, instead of focusing on divine things, we focus on earthly things. When this happens, we get spiritually disoriented and like Jim Marshall, we begin running in the wrong direction.

This seems to be the tension of discipleship. Peter understands, and then he doesn't understand at all. Actually, this seems to be a recurring pattern of his life. One minute he is walking on water, the next he is sinking. Sometime later he is saying to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Then just a few moments later, he realizes he really doesn't know what that entails for Jesus. Then near the end, the disciples all promise to stand by Jesus, and Peter even pledges to *die* with him and never deny him. But within an hour or two later, the disciples are all gone except Peter, who stays in close proximity with Jesus, long enough to deny to the world that he knew him.

He is, in this respect, representative of all those who follow Jesus. One minute we are like Peter—we seem to have a clear grasp of who we are in relationship with God, only to be totally clueless at the same time.

Yet, Jesus wants us to focus our energies on things from above. If we are to be his followers, we have to learn the meaning of sacrifice. That's why Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that if we want to be his followers we must deny ourselves and take up our own crosses and follow him.

So, what does it look like to strive for divine things—to be running in the right direction? In our Epistle for today, Paul tells us what sacrifice and discipleship are all about, and what it will cost each of us. In our relationships with others, Paul encourages us to “love one another with mutual affection; (to) out do one another in showing honor.” He goes on to explain that we must be extravagant in sharing our love with others to include even our enemies. He writes, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-10, 20-21).

Those words were written by Paul, the same person who wrote about his own struggles to follow through on the Christian life. Even after his conversion he struggled to be faithful and was quick to confess his failures, both as a human and as an apostle.

We are no different than Peter and Paul. We also struggle to remain faithful and don't always succeed. Jesus knows this. However, like with Peter and Paul, despite our many failures and mistakes, he calls us anyway to follow him. He never quits on us no matter how many times we seem to quit on him. His faithfulness to us in the face of our seemingly continuous faithlessness to him is due to the fact that Jesus believes that we are still good at heart. Because of this, he knows we have the potential to rise above our sinful natures. Jesus' optimism isn't naive or misplaced, either. Having walked as one of us, and having been exposed to the same temptations as we have, he knows the challenges that face us. Nevertheless, he didn't succumb to these temptations.

Consequently, he knows that we have the potential to resist them as well so long as we direct our hearts to divine things. By his witness and sacrifice, not only has he shown us another way to live, but he has made it possible for us to live that same way too.

Yet, despite God's gift of Jesus to the world, we can still head in the wrong direction. But even when we do go in the wrong direction, Jesus continues to call us to follow him, to live in the grace he provides, to deny ourselves and go in the right direction, in the direction of the kingdom of God. Unlike the story of Jim Marshall where he is more remembered for his one mistake than his many successes, our God of second chances is always ready for us to turn around and go in the right direction, no matter how many times we have failed. He forgets our mistakes almost as quickly as we make them and beckons us to follow him just the same. As John Claypool once said, "In his great mercy, our Lord is a forgetful Lord when it comes to our many mistakes."

This is like the story of the priest who had a lady in his congregation who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ, and he with her. The priest, however, was skeptical of her claims, so to test her visions, he said to her, "You say you actually speak to Christ in your visions? Let me ask you a favor. The next time you have one of these visions, I want you to ask him about a sin I committed when I was in seminary. Only God and I know what that was."

The woman agreed and went home. When she returned to the church a few days later, the priest said, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" She replied, "Yes, he did." "And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?" "Yes, I asked him." "Well, what did he say?" She said, "He told me it was so long ago that he can't remember."<sup>2</sup>

This illustration is a reminder that our past failures and transgressions are forgotten history in God's mind. The past—with its hurts, brokenness, and self-

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Larson, "Forgiveness and Forgottiness," in *Illustrations Unlimited*, (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988), p. 216.

recrimination—is gone, dead, and remembered no more. So when we stumble and fall, God never abandons us. Therefore, rather than giving up on trying to follow Christ when we fail, we should have confidence that no matter how many times we mess up and run in the wrong direction, God is there to turn us around and head us back in the direction that leads to the Kingdom.

**AMEN**