

Wandering Heart: "I'm Fixed Upon It"
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By Rev. Peter J. Blank H.R.

Have you ever gone the wrong way on a one way street? When you do it's a bit of a shock when you realize your mistake. Going the wrong way can happen.

I remember making a left turn on to a one way street in San Francisco. I didn't know my way around the city. I was carefully following the map. I turn left and immediately knew that I had made a mistake. There were two lanes of traffic coming directly for me. Fortunately for me, all the cars stopped where they and waited for me to turn my vehicle around to go the right direction. I was embarrassed.

Going the wrong way may be commonplace. Certainly that is true in Matthew 16. Just before these verses Jesus had asked his disciples what people were saying about him. Did they know who he was?

They gave back a variety of answers, and Jesus didn't seem too surprised. But to his disciples' chagrin, neither did he drop the matter there. Instead he pressed the query home in a very personal challenge. "Who do *you* say I am?" he demanded.

There was no room for fudging on this exam. Jesus had made it intense and immediate. No time to go back to the books for a night of cramming. Fortunately for the others, Peter blurted out an answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Fortunately for Peter, he got it right. Jesus praised him on the spot.

Then Jesus' announcement of mistreatment and betrayal

It seemed so weird. **First**, Jesus changed the mood of the conversation too quickly. One moment they were grinning and enjoying that moment when friends reach a new level of insight, commitment, and trust; the next Jesus was rambling on about death and dying. It didn't fit. Peter, certainly, wanted to bask in his celebrity status for a while. After all, he had managed to give the right answer to the toughest, most embarrassing challenge Jesus could have thrown at them. It was like winning an Oscar and a Grammy all at once, and Peter wanted to spend more time at the podium receiving the accolades of both Jesus and the others.

Then Jesus steps up to the microphone and starts recording his martyr's testimony. He is going to Jerusalem, he says. He knows his enemies are waiting for him there. He is certain they will arrest him and beat him and make him suffer. And he is confident that the outcome of their actions will result in his death.

There was clearly some kind of incongruity here. Peter had just voiced the great testimony that made Jesus seem invincible. Now, in the next breath, Jesus was breathing defeat and disaster. How do these match up? Where is the connection?

Then signs that Peter was going in the wrong direction

And if that wasn't enough, things only took a more eerie turn. Peter knew he had to deal with

this. After all, Jesus had just identified him as the leader among the twelve. Furthermore, he was still confident about knowing the right answers. So he pulled Jesus aside and started to talk him out of this morbid reflection. "Look here, man; you're scaring us. Do you hear what you're saying? You better get it together, Jesus. This is getting out of hand."

At that moment Jesus roughly pushed Peter away and started shouting at him. "Get away from me, Satan!" he yelled. "You're standing in my way! You're blocking my path! You're fighting against God!"

The disciples were in sudden shock, and Peter most of all. He was so taken aback that he didn't know what to do with himself. What could have caused this sudden tirade?

Everyone stood around for a bit, looking kind of dumb. Then Jesus broke the silence, but with a different demeanor. He poured out his heart. He gave them a sense of what was ahead for him, and for them. And in those moments of conversation Jesus spoke to them about the meaning of life. It is a strange and paradoxical word, but one of the truest things they would ever come to know, and we with them.

Jesus made this exchange a lesson about life

Jesus told them that life is a journey, not a destination. You see, when Peter made his testimony, his confession, his blubbering statement about who Jesus was, there was a sense of euphoria in the group.

You know how it is. Remember when you first said to someone that you loved her/him? Remember how those words changed everything? You didn't know if you should say it. You wanted to, but then again, you didn't want to. But suddenly the words blustered out and smashed into the open space between you. They took over. They stopped the conversation. There was nothing more to be said. You just sat there and looked at one another. It was like time stood still.

That is what Peter and the others were feeling when he blurted the words for the first time. "We think the world of you, Jesus! You're the Son of God! We love you! We didn't know who we were until you came along!"

When they talk that way, they want to sit around for a while and just smile at each other. The moment was intense and it begged to consume all those in it.

There is the human tendency to stay in that moment, and journey no further

Rabbi Harold Kushner remembered a scene from a television program that he saw years ago. He said it showed a young man and a young woman leaning together against the railing of a ship at sea. The winds tousled at their hair. The sprays showered them now and again. But they didn't notice any of it, because their eyes were glued on each other. The world disappeared around them as they murmured their love.

"If I should die tomorrow," he said softly to her, "I'd have lived an eternity in your love."

She nodded her head in bashful intimacy and leaned over to kiss him. Their lips lingered and

they became one as the bustle around them faded. Finally, they slipped away, arm in arm in the waltz of passionate lovers.

Behind them, in the void left as they shuffled, the slow two-step to the left, the camera caught a life preserver hanging on the galley wall. It carried the name of the ship: *Titanic*.

Maybe, in our soap-operish television viewing, that is enough for them: one night of romantic passion. It's the stuff of legends and fairy tales, where everything is compressed to the great hour of heroism or the night of intense love. Prince Charming kisses Sleeping Beauty and everything else gets summarized in a single line: "... and they lived happily ever after." Or the heir to the kingdom finds Cinderella with her glass slipper and the rest of the story is just one sentence: "... and they lived happily ever after."

That is often the way we want it, in our books and movies and television programs. We want to linger in the critical moment. We want to feel the emotional high of the kiss in slow motion. We want to sit in the experience of the warm fuzzies and then go get a burger.

But Jesus says, "No." Jesus says that life isn't found in the moment, not even if it is a moment of insight or love or passion. Life is a journey, not a destination.

But that's what Peter wanted, wasn't it? They wished the moment of truth to linger. They craved for the passion to last. They wanted to hold hands and speak kind words and sing those songs of love. They begged for the cameras to roll, and then they hoped to play the video over and over and over again. That's when Jesus reminded them that life is journey, not a destination.

That can be frightening for us because we get used to a moment of great beauty and then want to hold on to that moment. We try again and again to recapture it in some way, and relive it as if it were more real than the rest of our humdrum hours.

But life is a journey, says Jesus. "If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

That means traditions alone cannot keep our faith strong. It means that life and society and the church will always be changing. It can be frightening to us. How often I have had conversations with people who wished to turn back the clock, to put the pages back on the calendar, to relive the past once again. Then everything would be right and good and true and noble.

Life is journey, not a destination, and we know Jesus is right.

Life is a pilgrimage not a pleasure cruise or tour bus trip

There is something more, as well. Jesus tells us that life is a pilgrimage, not a tour.

You know what a tour is, don't you? It's where you let someone else do all the planning. They take care of your luggage. They put you on a big, air-conditioned bus and ferry you around to all the right sights. They pay the entrance fees for your tickets so you don't have to stand in the heat or the sun by the booth. You can stay safe and comfortable and dry, while others do the sweating for you. That's a tour.

A true pilgrimage, however, isn't like that. A pilgrimage is always personal, always firsthand, always something you have to do yourself. That is what Jesus says to his disciples. With Peter they want him to watch God's plans work themselves out from a safe distance. They wish for him to rest with them on the sidelines, to take the tour on the big love boat instead of swimming with sharks.

But Jesus says, "No." Life is a personal journey. He cannot avoid it. He cannot have someone else stand in for him. He has to make the pilgrimage himself.

We know the picture. It is the one that Jesus described to the disciples that day on the road. It is an allegory of the pilgrimage he is on, the journey that is always personal, the path that cannot be watched from a distance. This is the pilgrimage of the Messiah to the center of the city, to the garbage heap of society, to the hill called Golgotha -- the Skull! The Place of Death! The Mountain of the Crucifixion! There he must go -- personally.

Life is not a Spectator Sport

But so, too, those who are with him. Religion is no spectator sport. Harry Emerson Fosdick remembered a storm off the Atlantic coast. A ship foundered on the rocks and the Coast Guard was called out. The captain ordered the lifeboat to be launched, but one of the crew members protested. "Sir," he said in fear, "the wind is offshore and the tide is running out! We can launch the boat, but we'll never get back!"

The captain looked at him with a father's eyes, and then said, "Launch the boat, men. We have to go out. That is our duty. But we don't have to come back."

So it is, in one of the strangest things about life that Jesus tells us here. The one who wants to protect himself, the one who wants to hide herself, the one who wishes to guard himself carefully, will never find the meaning of life. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25 NIV).

That is why Jesus was so angry with Peter. Peter wanted Jesus to take the easy way out. He wanted Jesus to save his own life, to guard his own safety, to keep his body intact. How could the Son of God not be the Son of God? How could Jesus not do what only he could do?

That is the end of the story for us today. Peter's great confession, Peter's great denial, and Jesus taking both into his great heart, turning them into great grace. Life is a journey, he tells us, not a destination. We cannot sit down at one spot, however lovely it might be, and hug ourselves into some "... happily ever after."

Life is a pilgrimage, Jesus tells us, not a tour. It is lived in the footsteps of the Master. It is carried out in the mission of the church.

Here is the road no one wants to travel. It's the road I'm fixed upon it. It's the road we're fixed upon.

What does this mean for you personally? I don't know. I can't know for you and you can't know

for me. But this I do know: I know that you will know what it means for you if Jesus has spoken to you today.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

I believe in a God of second chances,

a God who sees through my stubbornness and holds my fear with tenderness.

I believe that this God of second chances

uses ordinary people like Peter to do good in the world.

Therefore, I believe and hope that God can use me too.

I believe that from time to time, God invites us to imagine the impossible.

I believe that from time to time, God invites us to change our minds.

This change is holy and important work, although challenging.

When fear and scarcity plague me,

or when the impossible feels out of reach,

I believe that God meets me with grace and invites me to follow.

Thanks be to God for a love like that.

Amen.