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P R O P E R 1 7

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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary (Track II)

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

In the middle of Reno, Nevada, there sits a small body of water named Virginia Lake—optimistically named Virginia Lake, because it's more of a pond, really. It's maybe a couple hundred yards across, with a pleasant sandy beach and an impressive population of ducks and geese. When I was three years old, my mother and I would bring a bag of stale bread and spend an afternoon here feeding the ducks, and fending off the geese—who could be uncomfortably aggressive, particularly since they were bigger than I was.

Besides the ducks, the other attraction for a small boy at Virginia Lake was the series of rocks and boulders along the shore. There's something captivating about a rock. It compels the human spirit to climb: magnificent in its solidity and permanence, like Gibraltar or Everest. In this particular case the rocks were only two or three feet high at the most, but for me—again, a three-year-old smaller than your average Canada goose—they were mighty and worthy of conquest. Until one fateful afternoon, when I was proudly standing on top of a particularly impressive big white one—and suddenly it shifted under my weight, rolling under me and sending me face-first into the ground.

I can't have been badly hurt. In my memory, there's the image of a bleeding cut on my hand, but we certainly didn't go to the hospital or anything. I'm pretty sure my mother's kiss was sufficient to heal the injury. But nevertheless, that memory has stayed with me as one of those vignettes from early childhood that sear themselves into our brains. The sudden terror: the sense, even, of betrayal, as what I had thought was a stable perch shifted right underneath me, and I learned the important life lesson that sometimes what seems like a sturdy foundation can turn out to leave you flat on your face. Not to put too fine a point on it, what I had taken for a sturdy foundation stone had turned out to be ... a stumbling block.

Stumbling block. That's the odd term Jesus uses for Peter in today's gospel. The Greek word is *skandalon*, related to our English word *scandal*, and meaning something you trip over. And it's particularly poignant because Peter had seemed to be a sturdy rock. Last Sunday, in the passage immediately before this one, we heard Peter declare that Jesus is the Messiah: and in response Jesus blesses him, nicknames him "Rock," which is precisely what the name Peter means in Greek, and says that it's on this Rock that Jesus will build the church. From sturdy Rock to stumbling block: what a change a few verses can make. It's a shame that the two paragraphs are divided up in our lectionary, because they're two halves of the same story. Last week Peter showed that he, of all people, had truly grasped who Jesus was: the chosen one, the divine ruler, the Son of God. Yet this week he reveals that he still doesn't understand what Jesus's divine kingship really means. When Jesus predicts his suffering and death, Peter is appalled: we might say he is *scandalized*. It's hard to blame him. For Peter it must feel as if Jesus is throwing away everything they've all been hoping for. No self-respecting earthly political leader would announce a platform like this.¹ So he protests: no way, Lord! You're not going to die a criminal's death, you're going to be installed as king at Jerusalem, remember? Poor Peter. He has it so right, and yet so wrong. What he doesn't understand—and how could he?—is that the kingship of Jesus involves serving rather than being served, to the ultimate extreme of giving even his life away. And so Peter becomes a stumbling block: he unintentionally becomes the voice of temptation for Jesus. The temptation Peter is proposing is the very same temptation Jesus will face at the end of his life, as he hangs on the cross and passersby make fun of him: why suffer and die when you could use your power to do such great things? "If you're really the Son of God," they say, "come down from the cross!" It's the same temptation Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry when he was tempted by Satan in the desert: "If you're really the Son of God" Satisfy your hunger by using your power to make bread out of stones. Satisfy your ego by pulling a dramatic stunt, diving from the roof of the Temple. Satisfy your desire to help people by becoming the ruler of the world. They're all different versions of the same temptation: to pursue security and success on the world's terms,

¹ See Lutheran pastor Paul Nuechterlein's use of this analogy in his commentary at http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper17a.htm and at greater length in his sermon at http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper17a_2008_ser.htm.

instead of walking the path of integrity and self-giving love that will lead Jesus to the cross. So Jesus repeats the same words he first said in the desert: "Get behind me, Satan"—not because Peter is actually Satan, but because right now it's Peter who is playing the role of tempter ... and the temptation is an attractive one.

Poor Peter. It's easy to pick on him for not understanding Jesus. He plays this role throughout the gospel: he walks out on the water, only to lose faith and sink. He goes to pray with Jesus in Gethsemane before his arrest, only to fall asleep. And of course, he promises Jesus that he'll be faithful to the end, only to deny knowing him three times when Jesus is about to be executed. But Peter isn't meant to be the stooge in Matthew's gospel, some kind of comic foil that we laugh at because we know so much better. Peter is us. Peter is the original model for every Christian, and for the entire church: in both his faith and his failure.

For two millennia now the church of Christ has spread hope and meaning to many, proclaiming the joyful news of God's victory over evil and death itself. And to that, Jesus says:

"Blessed are you, for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

Millions of holy lives have been nurtured by word and sacraments: heroic saints and ordinary believers alike, living in peace and compassion for the love of Jesus:

"You are the rock, on you I will build my church."

Countless people have been fed and clothed by hands reaching out in Jesus' name. The sick have been cared for, the homeless have been sheltered, and lives have been transformed:

"The gates of hell will not stand against you, and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

Yet like Peter, the church also succumbs to the temptation to embrace success and power instead of the way of the cross.

A medieval bishop rallies the crowds with his forceful sermon against the heathen invaders in the holy places, and the streets of Jerusalem run red with blood. And Jesus says:

"Get behind me, Satan."

Church officials in coats and ties shake hands in a civilized, well-appointed meeting room with pleasantly spoken bureaucrats from the governments of fascist Germany and Italy, and the voices of the churches remain silent in the face of darkest evil.

"You are a stumbling block to me."

A smiling, charismatic pastor preaches certainty from the pulpit about God's hatred for gays, as a silent teenager in a back pew wonders again what there is to live for.

"Your mind is not set on God, but on human things."

Who are we?

Are we the church of power, privilege, certainty, and success?

Or are we the church of disciples—humble, forgiven sinners who share a message of God's love for all? Jesus says that if we are his disciples, we are called to take up our cross. It may not mean martyrdom for each of us—but for each of us, it means something. It might mean giving away more of the money and possessions we've been blessed with than our friends can understand or approve of. It might mean stretching ourselves beyond our social or economic comfort zones to befriend people who scare us. It might mean taking a risk at school to speak up against a bully and defend an unpopular kid. For some of us, following Jesus may lead us to change our lives drastically, traveling across the world to live among the poor or going to jail to advocate for peace; for others, it might lead us to live quiet lives of faithfulness, finding small ways to spread God's love in each minute of our daily lives. And for all of us, there will be times when, like Peter today, we find ourselves taking the easy way out: seeking safety and status at the expense of the gospel. But even then, there is always repentance, and there is always forgiveness, and there is always Jesus inviting us to fall in love with him again and again.