

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, August 30, 2026

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom

on

Matthew 16:21-28

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Get Behind Me, Satan

Do you remember before streaming services, when you had to wait a week for the next TV episode to come out?

You may not know it, but that is basically what **just happened here**. Often the Gospel reading can skip a bit from week to week, but this week and last week they are **sequential**. So let me offer a brief recap of last week, If you remember what happened l, you can pretend you pressed the little button in the corner and tune out for a moment. I'll tell you when to come back.

Previously on the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do **people** say that I am?" They answer with a list of respected prophets. Then Jesus asks, "But who do **you** say that I am?" And Peter answers correctly: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah... you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

A real high moment for our friend Peter, last episode

Okay, those who tuned out can come back.

And that episode ends with Jesus saying, "Do not tell anyone that I am the Messiah."

Jesus Defines Messiah.

The next episode picks up where that one left off.

Matthew says, "From that time on" — from the time Peter names him the Messiah — Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and on the third day be raised.

That is how the episode starts. And it's a tough one, this gospel episode. The Messiah must be hurt, killed, and raised.

And Peter **cannot accept it. There they are Jesus with Peter and the other disciples and**

Peter takes Jesus **aside** and rebukes him: (hands – whisper) “God forbid it, Lord! It’s not supposed to be this way that’s not who you are and not what should happen to God’s annointed.

Which is a **wild thing** to say to the Son of the living God.

Peter thinks he gets to **tell the Messiah how Messiahs** are supposed to be. “The messiah isn’t supposed to die” he says

Jesus looks him in the eye and says “Get behind me, Satan”

I’m not sure what you think of Jesus but probably don’t expect to say this:

I got in a lot of trouble at school but never have I had my **teacher** call me Satan. (not to my face anyway)

Here Peter could learn a thing or two from us **modern New Yorkers**.

We have learned that we should let someone speak about themselves, to tell their own story, and to define themselves, what their identity means for them.

And yet, for all we have learned about that, do we not also do the same thing and **fail to let Jesus speak for himself**.

We pull him aside and say who he is and what he stands for.

Like Peter, for us who claim to follow Jesus **the threat is not that we would reject him in name but in substance**. We want a different Messiah.

Do you know what I’m saying?

Sometimes we want a Jesus who **wins**, who makes a difference, the difference we want.

I know you see this in public life as I do,

Jesus who blesses our side, A Jesus who conquers. The 10 Commandments shown, religion submitted to. We do a lot of speaking for Jesus claim Jesus as ours, This Messiah is a powerful tool of **cultural manipulation** but notice it is hardly ever the wounded, or suffering and certainly never crucified Christ.

If someone were to look at the way Jesus is **often portrayed he may bear no resemblance** whatsoever to the real Jesus, who said he must suffer and die.

Ah this is just the way of the world, gotta be competitive to get ahead and some win some lose, I am a winner and so is my Jesus.

We want to claim Jesus, the Messiah, sure, but not the way of the Jesus.

Now, maybe this is common sense to you at that point, so far be it from me to preach to the choir (well, perverbially, I like preaching to you choir)

Frankly, I have known some of you long enough I think **we really do want the way of Jesus, to follow his principles**. That false Jesus I mentioned you already reject him,

We want the Jesus of mercy. And justice. want peace. want love. We want harm to stop. And of course we should. There are people using the name of Jesus to cause real harm here and around the world, and no Christian of good conscience should ignore that.

We pull him aside, don't worry Jesus, I know those hypocrites are wrong about you – I will tell them who you are.

But are we speaking for the real Jesus?

(Once a child getting picked on by kids at school for his mom's job. In her defense he ran out and yelled, "My mom has an important job, she is a hippopotamus!" She was a Phlebotomous.)

We have spent so much time trying to defend the way of Jesus we have missed the person of Jesus. He is now an abstraction, a vague principle.

We still use words like justice and mercy We claim him as ours, But now it's much harder to pray. It doesn't seem like he is saying much. He has become an idol of our own making, **we know the Messiah better than he knows himself**,

We think we know the way, so we no longer need the Messiah – **Who needs the guide when you have the path?**

We have claimed his principles as our own and it is well-meaning.

What Peter says is kind to him, I don't want you to die, I want good things for you Jesus I don't want others to use you wrongly

And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan"

This is what happens when we try to speak for Jesus without letting him define himself.

Some claim Jesus for power. Others claim his principles. Both claim them as their own, but have forgotten one crucial thing: **Jesus cannot be claimed.**

He can only be followed.

"Get behind me, Satan"

Satan here means adversary: someone in the way of God. Jesus says, "You are a **stumbling block** to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The Rock has become the stumbling block.

But notice what Jesus actually says.

He does **not** say, "Go *away* from me. Satan"

He says, "**Get behind me.**"

It was then as it is now, any disciple never stands or walks in front or beside their Rabbi, **they always walk behind.**

When he pulls Jesus aside, he moves from following Jesus to correcting Jesus.

And Jesus puts him back in the place of the disciple. Follow me.

He says get behind me, you correctly named me the Messiah now let me show you what it means to follow him.

So Jesus' seemingly harsh critique as it always is is actually the invitation.

To let him speak for himself. To learn who he is and what he says, To define who he is and what God is like, To let him be the Messiah, **even when he is not the Messiah we would have designed or expected.**

And let's find our place right behind him when he says "Follow me. on the Way that leads through death into life."

Amen.
